The New Criterion

January 1988

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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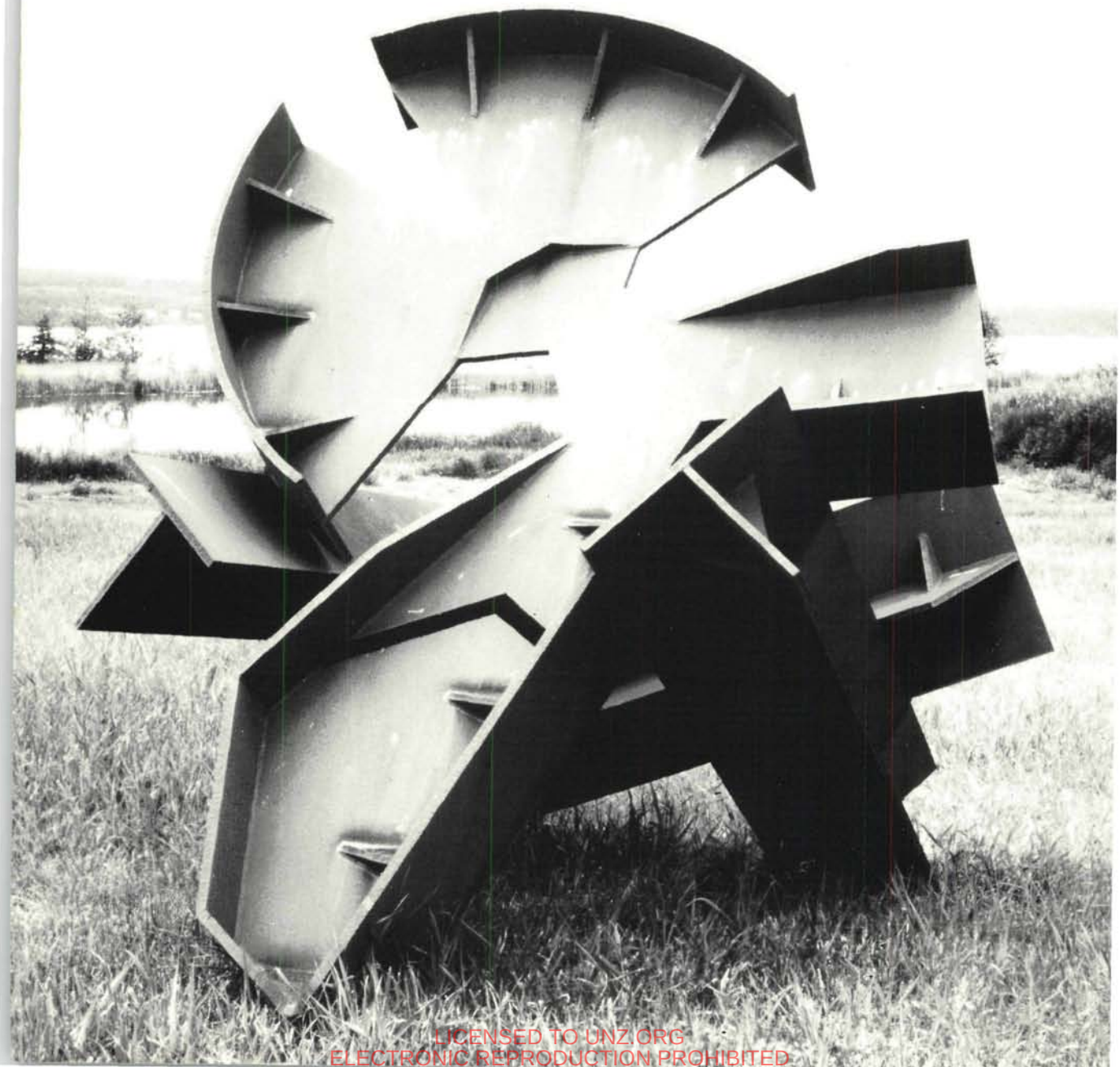

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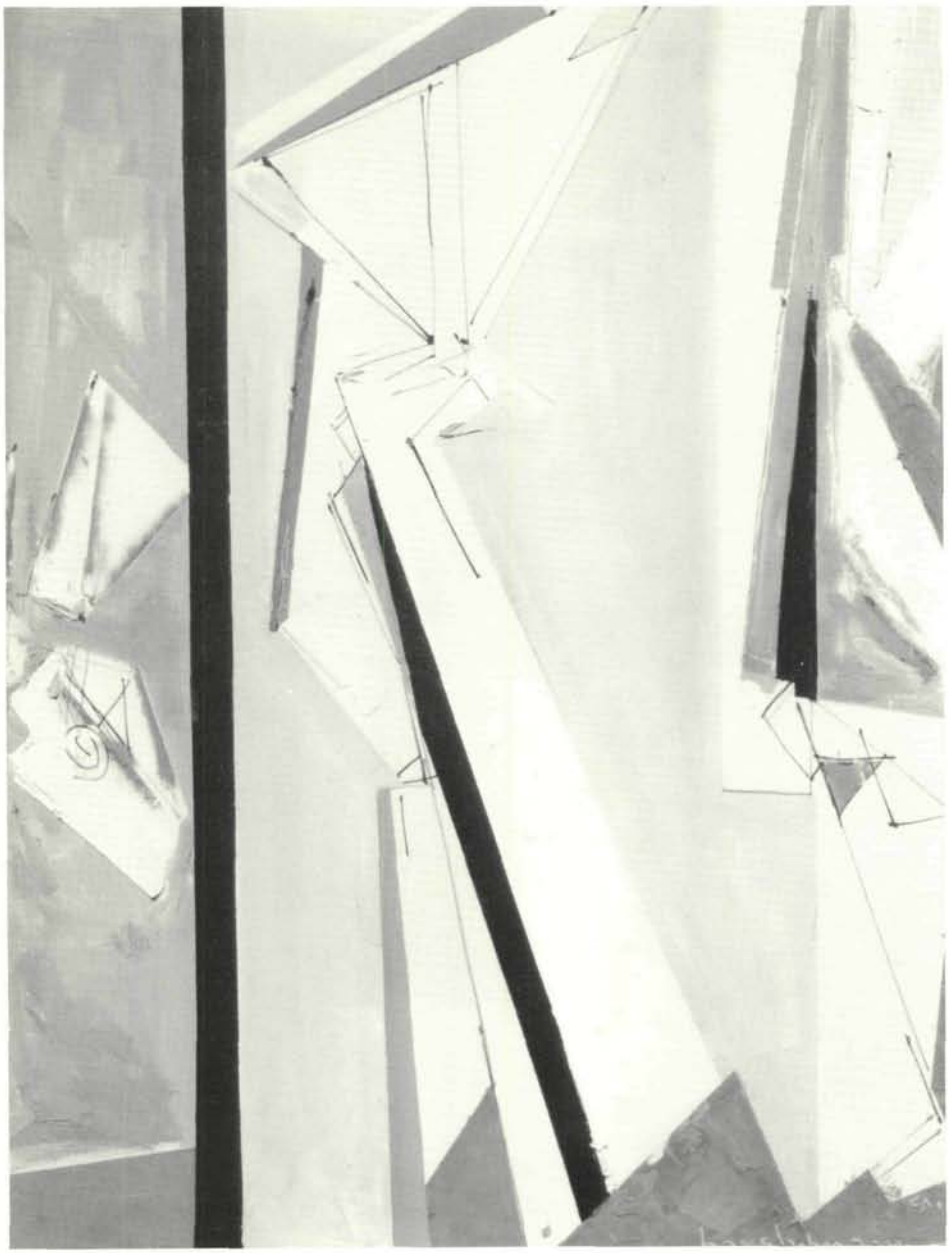

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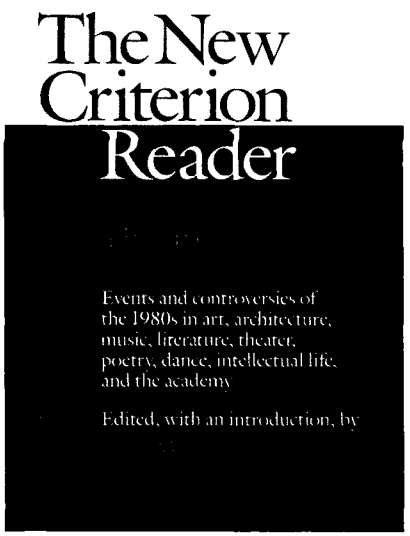
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Leaving the Party: the politics of Sterling Hayden

by Scott McConnell

There cannot be many men prominent enough for a quarter page obituary in the *Times* of whom it might be written: "he seemed to be in an alcoholic stupor much of the time, supplementing his wine intake with hashish." But this is what Sterling Hayden's obituary said, and though the *Times* was describing a particular scene in a documentary filmed on Sterling's barge in Paris, it was not so out of character as to be irrelevant to the obituarist's reckoning.

Furthermore, I don't think Sterling would have minded the description, though his widow (my mother) was less than delighted. He made no effort to hide his failings, about drinking or anything else. Punishing self-criticism was a theme of his autobiography, *Wanderer,* published in 1963, and in lighter versions it gave his appearances on television talk shows a sparkle of genuine eccentricity.

"Actor, sailor, and writer" was the way the *Times* summed him up when he died a year and a half ago at the age of seventy. To most Americans, Sterling was known as simply a movie star. Alongside dozens of forgettable roles, he did interesting work for John Huston in *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), and for Stanley Kubrick in *Dr. Strangelove* (1963); film buffs might recall *The Killing* (1956, also by Kubrick) or his drunken scenes in Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973). Nearly thirty years ago he captured the imagination of the tabloids by defying his ex-wife and a California court and taking his four young children on a year-long voyage to Tahiti in an old but graceful wooden schooner.

He could write vivid prose, and produced two books (*Wanderer* and a novel called *Voyage*) which sold well, along with volumes of journals, unpublished and probably unpublishable. He knew the sea and sailing ships perhaps better than any American of his generation. He was the natural center of any room he occupied. Curious, kind, capable of mordant self-mockery, he was blessed with the ability to make those in his company feel that they were close to the center of all that was interesting in the world. None of these gifts, it would seem, ever brought him a fair portion of satisfaction.

My mother married him in 1960, after two weeks of courtship. She was a New York glamour girl still in her twenties and blissfully untouched by politics or history. When she arrived in San Francisco, eight-year-old son in tow, both she and the boy quickly caught on to the fact that on his Bay Area turf Sterling was a real celebrity. He had countless, seemingly exotic, movie offers to turn down. He rowed a whaleboat across the Bay at dawn every morning to tackle the typewriter. He drank heavily, and demanded, again and again, that we move. Eight times during the Sixties alone the Hayden family changed residence, from one coast to the other—much of the time with the full baggage of a family grown to seven children. Expatriation to Europe was always under consideration. In 1968 Sterling began smoking

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marijuana, with characteristic lack of restraint—but this too brought little peace. The reasons why this gifted and well-loved man should have been so desperately restless may be beyond fathoming—a problem for the psychiatrists, of whom Sterling saw many. But at least some of the reasons make up a political story, which is the one that will be told here.

During most of the time that I knew Sterling Hayden, from 1960 until his death in 1986, he was—to use a purposefully imprecise word—a political "radical." For most of those years, he was radical in the most harmless of ways—a revolutionary in the living room. Growing up in his home exposed one to sweeping assertions about class, family, Russia, capitalism, revolution, and many of the other big subjects—an exposure no child is likely to regret.

A part of Sterling Hayden's life as a radical has already been told as a piece of the much written about and much distorted history of Hollywood and American Stalinism. Sterling had been a Communist Party member in 1946, and a fellow traveller for a few years before that. In 1951, he gave cooperative testimony to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), then engaged in its campaign to expose Communist influence in movieland. Twelve years later his autobiography, *Wanderer*, repudiated the spirit if not the facts of his testimony.

The book had a political afterlife which did not really begin until the 1970s. Then *Wanderer* became a much quoted primary source for such revisionist accounts of the culture of the Cold War as Stefan Kanfer's *A Journal of the Plague Years*, Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund's *Inquisition in Hollywood*, and Victor Navasky's *Naming Names*. Indeed, *Wanderer* became the Exhibit A of Hollywood memoirs for writers who sought to prove that the people who testified openly about their own Communist activities, and those of their former comrades, did so not out of their disillusionment with Communism but solely out of their desire to preserve their jobs and status in Hollywood. The tone of *Wanderer* also served as a harbinger of a more general and highly resonant revisionist portrayal of the period—in which America's Stalinists came to be described not as the members of a dedicated and disciplined party which wielded political influence far out of proportion to its numbers but as a rather relaxed group of reform-minded intellectuals and committed civil libertarians.

The story of how *Wanderer* came to convey such a message is in itself a curious one. For though Sterling Hayden regretted his co-operation with HUAC until the day he died, and though he wrote his autobiography in a spirit of almost fevered penance to the Communist Party, he didn't think of those he knew in the Party as gentle and impractical reformists at all. Indeed, in the original draft of *Wanderer* he painted quite a different picture, which was at once a richer, more personal, and more believable account of why he joined the Party and why he left it after a very short time.

Wanderer was a commercial success, a Literary Guild selection, and a best-seller in the Bay Area where Sterling and his family lived. My mother has a scrapbook full of favorable newspaper reviews. The book was not reviewed, however, in any of the opinion journals habitually concerned with the deeper trends of culture and politics—a lapse which is understandable only insofar as movie-star autobiographies are usually ghost-written and have little of importance to say. Had a reviewer for, say, *Partisan Review* taken on *Wanderer*, the book might well have been perceived as an early portent of a dramatic change in the American political weather.

A politically astute reviewer might have noted that it was dedicated to Warwick Tompkins, a sailor, writer, and Communist who, as Sterling had testified before Congress twelve years before, had drawn him into the Party's orbit, and also to Rockwell Kent, the prominent illustrator who was then as well known for his pro-Soviet political activities as he was for his art. What is more, around the time *Wanderer* was published Sterling himself was making a political

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splash of sorts in the Bay Area. His arrest in a civil-rights sit-in in one of San Francisco's automobile showrooms had been front-page news. He had been enlisted by the former Hollywood Ten stalwart Herbert Biberman to travel around the country for the Committee to Abolish HUAC, and was saying some silly things about the CP's absolute independence from the Soviet Union. He had spoken at a pro-Castro rally during the Cuban missile crisis, before a crowd which gave him hearty applause when he likened John F. Kennedy's policies to those of Adolf Hitler.

But even a politically astute reviewer of *Wanderer* would have been unlikely to know that Sterling's editor at Knopf was Angus Cameron, probably the most prominent representative of the Old Left in American publishing. Sterling had first heard of Cameron in an article by the Communist writer Albert Maltz. (Maltz had actually used a pseudonym to refer to Cameron, but Rockwell Kent identified him for Sterling.) At one time the editor-in-chief of Little, Brown, Cameron was forced to leave in the early 1950s because of his Communist views. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., had left that house a few years before because of Cameron's activities, noting that Cameron had rejected George Orwell's *Animal Farm* for political reasons. Schlesinger wrote Little, Brown's president that he would no more write for a publisher whose leading editor was pro-Communist than he would write for one whose leading editor was pro-Nazi. If Sterling did not know these details, he did know that Cameron was a "radical" who had been called to testify several times before congressional committees exploring Communist influence in American publishing, and that on each occasion Cameron had been a defiantly uncooperative witness.

During the period in which *Wanderer* was being written, Cameron was nothing short of a hero to Sterling. Only at the editor's firm and repeated insistence was he not mentioned in *Wanderer*'s dedication page. In Sterling's papers there are long and weepy drafts, written in a drunk hand, dedicating his life story to Cameron and Paul Robeson and Vincent Hallinan and Harry Bridges and "to their cause and their comrades throughout the world betrayed by me in 1951." Victor Navasky's book about Hollywood's response to the congressional investigations, *Naming Names*, is factually incorrect on several points about Sterling,[1] but Navasky is on the mark in singling him out as the one cooperative witness who was able to gain for himself a "measure of forgiveness" from the most embittered members of the Hollywood Communist community.

If the price of that forgiveness consisted in Sterling's willingness to publicly denounce HUAC and his own testimony, if it involved giving his voice to extremist rantings against President Kennedy, it was nevertheless a price which Sterling, in the early Sixties, was all too willing to pay. But it seems that he was asked to go even further—to submit to what can properly be described as the political bowdlerization of his own autobiography. He was ultimately willing to pay that price as well.

For the most part, *Wanderer* is a brightly written and revealing book. It evokes, in lively detail, Sterling's strange and often unhappy boyhood. After his father's death (from heart failure, apparently brought on by efforts to discipline the rowdy eight-year-old) his mother married a 1920s-era confidence man. Sterling grew up in the most rootless of worlds, his parents always on the

1 While there are many things about Navasky's book more disturbing than its factual errors about Sterling Hayden, these should be noted here. Bea Winters, the woman who, as Sterling testified, actually solicited his application for Party membership, was not, contrary to Navasky's assertion, Sterling's "mistress" or "former mistress" or anything of the sort, in 1946, or 1951, or at any other time. Nor was Phil Cohen Sterling's psychiatrist, though Navasky manages to base a half chapter about Cohen's alleged role in encouraging his patients to testify before Congress largely on the dialogue between Sterling and the unnamed psychiatrist depicted in *Wanderer*.

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move with big cars and borrowed money, sneaking out of expensive hotels at four in the morning, living in perpetual anticipation of "the deal" which would one day be closed. After being expelled from a series of schools (or forced to withdraw because of unpaid tuition), Sterling left at fifteen to go to sea. It was the onset of the Depression, possibly the last time in American history when the sea was that kind of option for restless boys. The book proceeds through vivid descriptions of the young man's obsession with sailing vessels and his precocious mastery of the sailor's craft. He received his master's papers at the age of twenty-two; until Hollywood discovered him two years later, in 1940, he was running cargo schooners up and down the Atlantic coast and as far away as Tahiti, with crews of men twice his age under his command.

Hollywood itself gets a baleful description in *Wanderer*, but the book is also harsh in its portrayal of the grade-B male starlet who knew nothing about acting but had drawing power as a "personality." There is not likely to be a memoir more forthcoming about the sexual pressures on a young man who, in his twenties, was so tall, so blond, and so striking that women pushed themselves upon him for his physical beauty alone.

Yet this revealing book grows laconic when it gets to the question of what drew a man like Sterling into the Communist Party in 1946 and then, six months later, out again. *Wanderer* does not avoid the issue, but tells the story in the most evasive terms. Sterling's first contact with the Party came in 1940, an unusual date for converts to Communism. The Popular Front "anti-fascism" which drew so much of Hollywood into the Left was of course no longer operative: these were the days of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, when Party leaders were proclaiming that the greatest threat to world peace came from the perfidious British imperialists. Sterling was twenty-four, with no political experience; he had spent most of the previous decade at sea. Just discovered by Hollywood, co-starring opposite Madeleine Carroll, and feeling uncomfortably removed from any realm he knew, he drove up to San Francisco one day to see Warwick Tompkins, a chronicler of sea voyages, the skipper of the schooner *Wanderbird*, and a man whom Sterling had admired since he first met him on the Boston docks years before.

Since Sterling had last seen him, Tompkins had joined the Communist Party; on his boat, docked in Sausalito, were gathered some Bay Area Party stalwarts:

> They kept using words I didn't know—working class, Fascism, solidarity, imperialist, monopolist. It occurred to me that I was in the midst of some very dangerous people, yet they didn't seem dangerous. They seemed different, that's all—more intelligent than the rest, and above all, more concerned.

Thus Sterling's introduction to the Party. The next step was the war. Sterling earned a Marine Corps commission, and was attached to the OSS. The capacity for command he had acquired at sea was readily transferable, and he was sent to Northern Italy with the mission of sailing supplies to Tito's Yugoslav partisans. Like many men who never fit easily into conventional life, he found aspects of war exhilarating. Tito's cause had every appearance of a totally just struggle, and the Wanderer discovered "that almost overnight he had become an integral part of the human race." He returned home on leave in 1944 a decorated hero, and sought out Warwick Tompkins. Tompkins and his friends hold a reception for Sterling at the San Francisco Communist paper, *The Daily People's World*. The Wanderer is encouraged to cultivate his film career, to learn to communicate with the masses. After demobilization he is active as a Hollywood "progressive" and in 1946 he actually joins the Party.

Wanderer limits Sterling's Party experience to a description of one cell meeting, taking up half a page. A dozen people, armed with the "conviction that Marxism, judiciously applied, can help make a better world," gather to discuss working conditions in the film industry. They don't drink.

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Sterling feels out of it, unable to participate in a discussion where such strange words as "surplus value" and "bourgeoisie" are used. He dozes off, and months later quietly resigns.

Three years later, worried that despite favorable reviews for his work in *The Asphalt Jungle* his film career is going nowhere, he goes voluntarily to the FBI and talks about his past. A year after that he receives a HUAC subpoena. He is traumatized. He tells his psychiatrist that he would like to take out an ad in *Variety* praising the Party but hasn't the guts. Only those under Party discipline, he tells the psychiatrist, have the courage to tell the inquisitive congressmen to "screw themselves." The ex-Communist is in a real bind. He decides to testify, rationalizing that he might have a divorce looming and would want custody of the kids. In Washington, he is the first big-name witness to cooperate with the Committee, and receives raves from Congress and the film tabloids. To himself he is a "real daddy longlegs of a worm"—this only one of the self-punishing characterizations that appear throughout *Wanderer*.

This account does relate, in minimalist fashion, the basic facts of Sterling's passage through the Communist Party. As for the comrades themselves, *Wanderer*'s depiction of them eerily anticipates the tone of such books as Lillian Hellman's *Scoundrel Time*, which describes Communists as dreamy idealists, "concerned" to be sure, but really nothing more than woolly-headed participants in a "Marxist" debating club. From Sterling's words one would never guess that the Party during these years was throwing most of its resources into a shrill international campaign to portray America's leaders as fascists, and that its *overt* activities centered on a campaign to stifle European and American resistance to the push of Stalinism westward into Europe. But what is equally remarkable and a good deal sadder about these lifeless passages is that Sterling had, in the original draft of his autobiography, written something much richer.

This draft was about thirty percent longer than the published version, and Sterling himself was not happy with it in an artistic or stylistic sense. Nevertheless, a great many sections about Sterling's childhood, his acting, and his sea experiences made it from the first draft to the published version with only light copy-editing. The more "historic" sections of *Wanderer*, particularly those concerning Sterling's encounters with American Communists, were completely recast. I have been unable to locate Sterling's own second draft of his book, which he considered superior to the first; in its absence it is impossible to tell how much of the revision of the Communist material was done by Sterling and how much was done in-house at Knopf. What can be verified from Sterling's own papers was that he was deeply saddened by the discrepancy between his second draft and the galleys he received from his editor. Upon receiving them, he wrote Angus Cameron of his "enormous sense of failure" at seeing that his work had required so much "drastic overhauling"—and expressed sarcastic admiration for the "monumental effort" by the re-write editor whom Cameron had enlisted to re-do certain passages in the voice of Sterling Hayden. Some weeks later he apologized for his reaction, writing to Cameron that, while he still felt that "so much that I thought—and still think—was good was just chopped up," he had become "aware at last of the value of economy and terseness." Three days after that he approved sending the edited manuscript to the printer.

As I have pointed out, Sterling wrote *Wanderer* with the clear intent of praising the Communist Party and criticizing himself, and he shrinks from neither task in his own first draft. But there he does try hard to explain what it was exactly, both about himself and about the Communists, which made him unable to remain in the Party. It is these characterizations of the Party's members, which stress their dogmatism, discipline, and single-minded emphasis on a life devoted to political goals, that were expurgated from the published version of *Wanderer*.

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There is much else as well, for the young Sterling Hayden had another mentor, ten years older than Tompkins, who also knew the sea, wrote extensively, and had firsthand experience with American radicalism. This was Lincoln Colcord, an historical figure in his own right, who was all but written out of the published version of *Wanderer*. Colcord had been born in a schooner off Cape Horn and came from a long line of Maine sea captains; he had also been a prominent Washington journalist during World War I, a friend of Walter Lippmann, and a confidant of Colonel House; after that he moved further to the Left and became an editor of *The Nation*.

By the 1930s, Colcord had retired to Maine, abandoned his radicalism, and settled into a quiet life of writing for local newspapers and reviewing books about the sea. He met Sterling in 1936, when the latter was the twenty-year-old first mate of the schooner *Yankee*, and there began a friendship and an extensive correspondence. Lincoln Colcord died in 1947 with a letter in his typewriter vigorously arguing that Sterling was making a grave mistake in having anything to do with the CP.

For Sterling, these two men, Colcord and Warwick Tompkins, served as competing mentors, even as competing father figures. He corresponded extensively with both during the war. In Yugoslavia his respect for Tito's partisans began to extend to admiration for Communists in general. From his war experience he absorbed one simple political idea, which was that Communists were spearheading the fight against fascism—an idea which would turn into a burden ever more difficult to bear when he tried to carry it to realms beyond wartime Yugoslavia. Still, he was trying to think it through. Tompkins showered him with copies of *The Daily Worker* and *New Masses*, while Colcord mailed poetic descriptions of the Maine coast. One memorable day, Sterling received from Colcord a copy of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*: the first draft of *Wanderer* goes on for some pages about how he read *Walden* every night by the fire, how he made marginal notes all the way through it, how it was the first book which had ever confirmed him in his own sense that it was possible to carve out one's own niche in life apart from the common concerns of most men.

To read *Walden* is to be immediately struck by how much of its flavor seeped into Sterling's own conversation. Thoreau sets out all of the reasons for not doing what other men do—which taken together raise the individual's separation from society to a nearly religious imperative. In the original *Wanderer,* Sterling uses Thoreau as the symbol of his first inklings of the psychic gulf which separated him from the American Stalinists. The scene takes place in 1944. Sterling Hayden, budding film star and decorated war hero, is home on leave from Yugoslavia, at the reception held for him at *The Daily People's World*. The young veteran feels "almost lionized." But he relates that "something was wrong"; he felt a "sensation of aloneness" even though he was among "warm and earnest friends." He tried to bring up Thoreau and *Walden*, both at the reception and several times thereafter. "But when I did sort of a hush would follow. Nobody ever challenged Thoreau's position, it seemed they just didn't care. I wondered why." He goes on to lament what he sees as the lack of a middle ground: on one side there were people who drank and played and talked of frivolous things, on the other were "doctrinaire Marxists who seldom drank and seemed keen and aggressive." This portrait of American Communists—as stone-deaf to the call to individual autonomy raised by Thoreau—placed Sterling as distant in temperament from the Stalinists as he felt from mainstream America.

He joined the Party anyway, after the war. Nineteen forty-six finds him a Hollywood progressive but still keeping up a heavy correspondence with Lincoln Colcord in Maine. Colcord, without success, is urging his younger friend to read Max Eastman about Russia and Friedrich Hayek about liberty. The original draft of *Wanderer* encapsulates these months not, as does the edited version,

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with a description of a cell meeting in which the movie star feels uncomfortable because he can't keep up with the Marxist vocabulary (a difficult scene to imagine for anyone who knew Sterling), but with a vignette which underscores the tension between that realm of experience most dear to Sterling, the sea, and the collective personality of the Hollywood Reds.

The chapter, aptly titled "The Outsider," opens with the young actor, then six months in the Party, inviting his comrades for a Sunday sail on the small schooner he had purchased with his first postwar paychecks. Getting underway, he comments to himself, "I don't know why you invited them in the first place, they don't give a damn about this sort of thing." Then: "Hey I got it. You want to show them you're good for something after all . . . you want to prove you're not as ineffectual here as you've been in all those meetings." He recalls one meeting in particular where he was given the assignment of making the case before the Screen Actor's Guild to support the carpenters' strike. "Reagan showed up and took over and ground you into a pulp; they all kept looking to you to hold him down but he dominated the whole thing and when it was over they told you right to your face you were pretty weak and the gathering did more harm than good." But Sterling falls flat again; the comrades aren't interested in his sea exploits. "You're wasting your time Sinbad," he tells himself. "They couldn't care less about all this. Call it off, run down the sails and break out the Scotch and take it easy. Suppose we get three miles out and spend the night becalmed. They'd go out of their minds with the emptiness of it all . . . ." But the wind picks up, and "Sinbad" has to do some nice maneuvering with sails. Still, the comrades are oblivious; some read, one opens a beer. "Hey look at that guy with the beer, thought these immortals didn't drink," thinks Sterling, reminding himself that "you've never allowed anyone to take a drink underway in your life." But he backs off and negotiates his way back to port while the sky yellows and the bay fills with whitecaps. The guests remain seated in a circle, listening "with rapt attention to a small round man who wears glasses." They don't notice the play with the sails—the "canvas crackling overhead as the Wanderer steers with one bare foot" or the nuances of docking a sailing ship without a motor. From the circle of intense political conversation, one of the comrades looks up and remarks, "Hey, we're back in port."

To anyone who knows Sterling, these passages, ironic and self-mocking ("Sinbad"), can only be read as wounded words, meant to describe both the Party's inability to accept him as he was and the larger gulf which separated him from the Hollywood Reds and the "keen and aggressive" Marxists he had met in the Bay Area. What he shared with them was an alienation from America, though his natural impulse was to work it out by staking out a separate existence, through the sea or through Thoreauvian gestures of nonconformity. As much as he may have wished to, he could not find it within himself to accept discipline in the Party's sense of the word. This was not a difference over politics, about which Sterling thought little, but simply over the spirit in which one lived one's life.

It should be recalled that Sterling wrote this draft of *Wanderer* in a fevered frame of mind, still wracked with shame for having named names a decade before, and that he was then emerging as a figurehead for the causes of the far Left. Yet even so, when it came to describing his former comrades on the Old Left in his book, the most telling words he could find were ones which portrayed them as dogmatic and aggressive—all the while chastising himself for not being able to raise himself to their level of political intensity. This sense of his own remoteness from the Party's personality was the problem which not only provoked his departure but also ensured that, when the time came, he would be unwilling to thumb his nose at the congressional committees for the Party's benefit.

There is also some evidence that Sterling came to feel he was being used during the

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time he was in the Party. On the surface he had real possibilities as a political figurehead. As a war hero with a powerful physical presence and the most prominent actor in postwar Hollywood who was both a Party member and, arguably, a leading-man type, he must have seemed interesting to the Party's leaders—Stalinist influence in the film world then being largely limited to writers and directors. Warwick Tompkins had arranged for him to meet V.J. Jerome, the Party's cultural commissar, and he was interviewed by another ranking Party figure, not identified in *Wanderer*. Both sides seemed to have left the conversations feeling disappointed. Colcord, at any rate, raised the question of Sterling's being used. Colcord had become particularly agitated when he heard that Tompkins had come down from San Francisco to stay with Sterling for the purpose of writing a sort of Party biography of the young actor—which would demonstrate how, in Tompkins's words, a former "escapist sailor," actor, and war hero had recently emerged as a "leading figure in the anti-fascist struggle at home." "Just what is 'the anti-fascist struggle at home'?" Colcord demanded, and warned Sterling in no uncertain terms that if he allowed his past to be written up for Stalinist purposes, he would regret it for the rest of his life. Sterling took Colcord's advice and aborted the book, though Tompkins had already written seventy-five thousand words. Shortly thereafter Sterling left the Party. Three years later he went to the FBI to tell them what he knew about Communists in Hollywood, and a year after that he came before HUAC as a friendly witness.

That last, public recantation was of course the most difficult. For Sterling, it was an unwilling confession; he had not become an anti-Communist, merely a non-Communist. In later years he would state, many times, that there was nothing in his life he regretted more. Nevertheless, the unpublished draft of *Wanderer* goes a long way to explaining why—faced with the unpalatable choice of telling the truth or pleading the Fifth—Sterling Hayden did not choose to put the cause of Communism over his own career. In this respect his choice was exactly the same as the one made by the overwhelming majority of other HUAC witnesses who were not under Communist Party discipline.

The testimony before HUAC, unwillingly given, and the hollow praise which followed it, did nothing for Sterling Hayden's self-esteem, and the resultant guilt began to push him back toward the Left. He felt as estranged from Hollywood as ever, and throughout the 1950s made (with the notable exception of *The Killing*) one poor picture after another. He did divorce his wife, and gained custody of his four children. Soon after, he struck out with them on a long and romantic and, so ruled the court, illegal voyage to Tahiti.

After his return, and a sudden marriage in 1960 to a young, spirited, and apolitical New York socialite—a choice which surprised the friends of both parties—he started in on his autobiography. After its drafts were completed, with an effective performance in Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* under his belt, Sterling began to look for a way back into radical politics. What he sought was a dramatic individual gesture, where he would "make a statement" in his own style. As *Wanderer* was being edited, he proposed to Angus Cameron a new book, a travelogue, which would climax with Sterling Hayden sailing at dawn into a harbor on the north coast of Castro's Cuba. As he related in the proposal, he was aware that he would arouse suspicion, and that the Cubans probably would arrest him at first. But, he told Cameron, he had gone over the matter with Harry Bridges, the radical head of the West Coast Longshoremen's Union, and Bridges had assured him that "people" in the United States could "vouch" for him with "people high up in labor" in Cuba. Once released, Sterling could tell the story of the new Cuba.

One wonders what might have happened if this fantastic piece of political theater had taken place. There was one difficulty which I don't think Sterling contemplated. After his performance before HUAC, there was no

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reason why anyone on the Left could trust him to do a reliable job with such a delicate subject. Though Sterling had absorbed much of the gibberish about Castro's new "direct democracy" then being circulated by some of the West's most noted thinkers, he had never himself developed that set of reflexes which allow political pilgrims to willingly serve as accomplices in the crimes carried out in the name of socialism. However much he admired Castro from afar, it is impossible to say how he would have reacted if, during his sojourn, he had been reached by the tale of Hubert Matos or others among Castro's former comrades, then imprisoned because they opposed the turning of the revolution into a Communist dictatorship. It seems entirely possible that his response would have been dismay and disillusionment, and that he would have said so. In any case, Angus Cameron showed no enthusiasm for the plan, and when Sterling proceeded to borrow money to go ahead it took nothing less than the Cuban missile crisis to put an end to the project.

Though Sterling would bounce his ideas for such projects off people like Harry Bridges and Vincent Hallinan, another Bay Area stalwart of the Old Left, by the early Sixties he had more affinity with the nascent New Left than he did with the Old. While his radicalism in 1962 had much to do with remorse about his HUAC performance, it drew on another source of alienation—the tradition which condemned America's successes even more than its failures. In Sterling's mind, America stood guilty not because of the pockets of poverty which existed within its borders but because of its more general affluence. His reaction to the civil-rights movement illuminates this. By the summer of 1963 he had participated in one sit-in, and had spent one night in jail—for the ostensible purpose of pressuring San Francisco's car dealers to hire black salesmen. While such actions may have meant, for other white veterans of the Old Left, an opportunity to reappear on the public stage as civil-rights activists, Sterling had his own idiosyncratic calculations. As he wrote to one of his closest friends, the Los Angeles-based writer Turnley Walker, explaining why he wasn't planning to attend and speak at the (soon to be historic) 1963 march on Washington:

> I find it hard to speak with or to members of the civil rights movement without getting off on an incendiary track. I've tried a bit. Perhaps it's that I lack the control and fluency to be subtle. No, that's shit. I don't feel that subtleties are to the point. I want to tell the Negro to forget about the idea of equality. Equality with what? The average white citizen . . . amounts to so much chromate crap. They are like our big new cars: all fins and gadgets and gloss and never an ounce of integrity. Why would any intelligent person aspire to such a condition? No, I think the Negro might grow and go on to become the person we might have been—before the Emersons and Thoreaus and the rest were put in the bag by the Mammonists.

This was typical of Sterling. For him, "chromate" was the kind of big, significant word that "plastic" would become a few years hence, symbolizing everything he took to be false and despicable about modern America. "Chromate" represented the suburbanite's den done up in a "nautical" motif. It meant the triumph of motorized cabin cruisers over wooden schooners, central heating over coal-burning Franklin stoves, neon lighting over kerosene, packaged tour groups over the solitary traveller with a knapsack. His was, in short, a traditionalist's lament as much as it was a revolutionary's—though Sterling had, if one excluded his time spent with schooners, never been involved with a traditional community in his life. He could raise the cry against the culture of commerce—that staple of intellectual discourse found just as often on the traditionalist Right as on the Left—as eloquently as anyone. He tried to give political voice to such feelings by embracing the far Left, and he yearned for a purifying revolution which would sweep away modernity itself. But this last impulse does not properly belong to the

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Left, and over time awareness of this served to loosen Sterling's own embrace.

At least something loosened it. For Sterling Hayden, radical movie star, newly minted author, his penance to the Communist Party more or less paid up, failed to advance in radical politics after 1963. This still seems curious: in 1963 he seemed to represent so much of what the radical Sixties would stand for. Anti-bourgeois, anti-materialist, pro-Communist in an informal, nondogmatic way, he seemed, in retrospect, perfectly poised to become one of that decade's adult mentors. But he did not. After the publication of *Wanderer,* he settled in to write a long historical novel (*Voyage,* not published until 1976), began to turn down speaking requests, and wrote Angus Cameron of his unease at becoming a "figurehead for causes." In letters he claimed that a dislike of public speaking held him back from the political fray. Still, there seems more to it than that: Sterling had always been able to speak well when he knew what he wanted to say, much as he was always able to lead when he felt sure of the direction to be taken.

I would submit that Sterling drew back from his second chance with the Left, in the mid-Sixties, for essentially the same reasons he drew back the first time, in the late Forties: a crisis in his own belief about how much he really had in common with its leaders, and even more about how much he really favored the Left's triumph. I write this in the face of much written evidence of his unvarnished revolutionary sentiments. Yet for all his expressions of admiration for the various Reds in *Wanderer* and for Angus Cameron, and for all his evanescent friendships in the early and mid-Sixties with people like Albert Kahn and Harry Bridges, something kept him back the second time around as well. Certainly it was not fear—no more than fear was the issue in 1946-47. It had more to do with the fact that Sterling didn't hate America in quite the deep, visceral way that was necessary in order to feel comfortable on the Left. Although he sometimes signed letters "yours for the revolution, and the liquidation of the bisnik class," although he publicly likened Kennedy to Adolf Hitler, we who lived in the Hayden household somehow absorbed the feeling that all of this was really more of a show than a conviction.

Sterling would cast a baleful glare at his children happily settled in before "The Man from U.N.C.L.E."; he would hurl the brand new Peppermint Twist records into the harbor and replace them with Pete Seeger's. He would talk darkly of the plans of such right-wing fringe groups as the John Birch Society and the Minutemen, and explain to his children how a small disciplined minority could actually seize power against the wishes of democratic society. (It was not until years later, when I first read Lenin, that it occurred to me where such musings probably came from.) He talked to his family about the need for expatriation in the face of Goldwater's "inevitable" election. Yet there was a level at which these sentiments, while they were expressed, were not really believed, or at least not deeply believed. Whatever Sterling might have exclaimed about Jack Kennedy before a throng of Castroites at Berkeley, I remember that Kennedy was talked about in the Hayden home with a certain measure of affection. I don't know whether it was Sterling or my mother who brought home a phonograph record, famous at the time, in which actors gave a White House tour playfully exaggerating the accents of Jack and Jackie, but I remember it being played in an ambience of cocktails and laughter, even—could this be true?—friendly and deferential laughter.

Radicalism thus was a pose. Surely it was no pose for the men Sterling knew from the Old Left—Hallinan and Bridges, Cameron and Albert Kahn. But these friendships, made after 1962, were hardly deeper than those he made during his first time around with the CP in the 1940s. The people whom he regularly drank with, entertained, wrote personal letters to, were more often than not liberals, indeed in some cases anti-Communist liberals of a species now facing extinction. With them Sterling would fulminate about how the system was totally corrupt and about to come crashing down, and they

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would enjoy the repartee and the challenge of stripping away his enthusiasm for whatever revolutionary dictator was most recently in the news. Sterling would always speak about Cameron, Bridges, and Hallinan with a certain measure of deference; but for all intents and purposes in the last twenty years of his life he never saw them.

Sterling was, until very late in his life, willfully obtuse about why people were anti-Communist. This blindness caused him more anguish than it did anyone else. In Sterling's mind, there always remained that part of the Communist line which postulated that only Communists were really "committed." Democratic socialists and liberals were trimmers or sell-outs, conservatives driven solely by greed. And yet, since Sterling knew that he himself was not a Communist, could not be a Communist, and in fact had, when called upon, testified against the Communists, his view gave him little grounds for self-respect in a political sense. This explains much of why this accomplished and well-loved man would often sign notes to my mother with the sad sobriquet "Captain Zero."

His efforts to understand something about why people distrusted and feared the Communist Left were simply feeble. In a 1963 letter to Cameron, he asked why it was that so many old radicals, like Dos Passos, had become anti-Communist "reactionaries," and whether Cameron could recommend an essay on the subject. Cameron offered no guidance, and it is a sad comment on the limits of Sterling's world that there was no one else he thought to ask.

He needed this "essay," or better, this bookshelf, more than anyone I have ever known. It would include, of course, *The God that Failed,* and George Orwell, and Arthur Koestler, possibly Raymond Aron, and even Sterling's old comrade-in-arms from the Yugoslav partisans, Milovan Djilas. Hard as it is to believe, Sterling was completely ignorant of the work of such men. For him anti-Communism was the creed of Bob Hope and Ronald Reagan and speculators in Southern California's real estate—charming men perhaps, but not the sort that impressed him very much. Thus from the late Sixties and through much of the Seventies he remained both outside the Left and guilty about it. Dimly conscious that the Left in power implied, at best, a social conformity he could never stomach, he felt the fault was in himself, that he was too weak and selfish to get out and advance the beautiful idea of the liberating socialist dictatorship.

Instead, he cultivated his eccentricity, a Thoreauvian apartness, which was not cost-free either. He bought a barge, uninhabitable for family life, and puttered around Europe's (Western Europe's) canals. In the last decade of his life he travelled obsessively, shipping his vintage BMW motorcycles back and forth across the continents and oceans, all in an endless quest for the truly authentic place. In the backdrop was an on and off battle against alcoholism, with its fleeting victories and punishing defeats. His effort to write a third book—about alcohol, marijuana, travel, and marriage—became more or less pro forma. In the end, he paid for his disdain for "conventional" medicine by succumbing to a highly treatable and almost banal cancer, after years of ignoring its symptoms.

He was, during this last decade of his life, apolitical, even by comparison with his attitude in the late Sixties. Solzhenitsyn and the boat people had wrung from him the last drops of philo-Communism. But reconciliation with bourgeois America had not even begun. One of the last times we discussed such matters, Sterling told me he expected Communist advances to continue—Russia after all was tough and America soft and corrupt. Only then, after the final victory of the Left, would there be "the greatest blow-up the world had ever seen" in which people all over would rise against the Communist usurpers of the beautiful revolutionary idea. Such was the madness.

He was calmer at the very end. In the room where he died—a studio apartment in Sausalito, with a high and sweeping view of the Bay—he had taped to his wall a last,

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quite political, message. It was a quotation, printed on a calendar leaf; he had kept it with him for eight years. This was curious; Sterling by this time rarely talked politics, and I wondered whether he had hung it there to discourage his friends and family from broaching the subject. Yet there it was—in the entryway to the room laden with things that could only belong to Sterling, gathered from a life's wandering. Never before, in all the spaces he had made his own, had there been so much as a political poster, much less a quote. So it meant a great deal. The words, from the Irish writer Brendan Behan, read: "What the hell difference does it make, left or right? There were good men lost on both sides." Not the end of wisdom, perhaps, but surely close to a beginning. It had not been an easy road to get there.

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A liberated woman

by Terry Teachout

The surest shibboleth of the committed ideologue is a willingness to praise bad art. This willingness, of course, is frequently the product of necessity. Most of today's feminist writers, for instance, are literary sloganeers whose artistic seriousness is fatally undermined by their enthusiastic adherence to a political agenda. Those women writers who deserve to be taken seriously, on the other hand, are often politically indifferent at best, hopeless heretics at worst. To be sure, some of them have lived private lives which recall the more extravagant pages of a Mary McCarthy novel. But one is hard-pressed to come up with a woman writer of indisputable significance who has devoted anything like a substantial part of her professional energies to the feminist cause.

Enter Rebecca West. Widely praised as the greatest journalist of her time, her involvement in the English feminist movement during the early years of the century was both extensive and significant. Moreover, the details of her personal life can still bring a flush of righteous fervor to the most ascetic cheek. Here was a woman who actually *suffered* for the cause, who bore a child out of wedlock at a time when such things were not yet the common coin of popular journalism. To top it off, she was impregnated by no less a figure than H. G. Wells, proving that all men, even the most superficially progressive, are ruthless oppressors under the foreskin.

An admiring biography was clearly inevitable, and it has now appeared.[1] Victoria Glendinning, who knew Rebecca West during the last decade of her life, is one of those women writers who specialize in writing books about other women writers. Her three previous biographies were *Elizabeth Bowen, Edith Sitwell: A Unicorn Among Lions,* and *Vita: The Life of Vita Sackville-West. Rebecca West: A Life* would seem to fit the pattern quite nicely, and Glendinning's heavy-handed introduction accordingly smacks of the will to adore: "The story of Rebecca West, who lived from 1892 to 1983, is the story of twentieth-century women. She was both an agent for change and a victim of change." Anyone miss the point? Don't worry, it comes around again on the next page:

> There is little that a woman could have achieved, enjoyed, and suffered during the decades when women's lives were being transformed that she did not achieve, enjoy, and suffer. But she is not just an emblem of modern woman. As Wells wrote of his first meeting with her, when she was a mere girl, "I had never met anything like her before, and I doubt if there ever was anything like her before."

Not only is *Rebecca West: A Life* frankly admiring of its subject, it emphasizes straight biography over criticism to an annoying

1 *Rebecca West: A Life,* by Victoria Glendinning; Knopf, 300 pages, $19.95.

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degree. Miss Glendinning's original commission is to some extent responsible for this imbalance. Rebecca West herself requested in her will that two biographies be written, a full-length treatment by Stanley Olson and a shorter book by Victoria Glendinning. "There is room not only for a detailed biography in the future," she explains in her introduction, "but for studies of aspects of her life and work which this first biography has not been able to cover fully." This sounds reasonable enough. But certain "aspects" which have been omitted from *Rebecca West: A Life* for the ostensible sake of compression are absolutely central to the coherent telling of Rebecca West's story, and one soon begins to suspect that their omission was effected on other than strictly literary grounds.

In *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon,* a brilliant meditation about European history and politics disguised as a travel book about Yugoslavia, Rebecca West observes that

> the word "idiot" comes from a Greek root meaning private person. Idiocy is the female defect: intent on their private lives, women follow their fate through a darkness deep as that cast by malformed cells in the brain. It is no worse than the male defect, which is lunacy: they are so obsessed by public affairs that they see the world as by moonlight, which shows the outlines of every object but not the details indicative of their nature.

As a writer and a public figure, Rebecca West chose to set up shop toward the masculine end of this continuum. Her novels are neither important nor, for the most part, interesting. Her true *métier* was journalism, both literary and political, and politics is without question the salient theme in her mature work, from *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* down through *The Meaning of Treason,* her study of the traitors of World War II and after, to *The Court and the Castle,* a series of literary lectures whose English edition bears the revealing subtitle "A Study of the Interactions of Political and Religious Ideas in Imaginative Literature."

That a woman should interest herself in politics is hardly noteworthy. But the nature of Rebecca West's political views was something else again. Whittaker Chambers, reviewing *The Meaning of Treason* for a 1947 *Time* cover story, remarked that "Rebecca West is a Socialist by habit of mind and a conservative by cell structure." Hers was a firmly independent and autonomous mind. Though she hated war, she accepted, however reluctantly, the necessity of using force to combat totalitarianism. ("Do you believe," she said of the Peace Pledge Union, "that you are going to abolish cancer if you get 100,000 people to sign a pledge that they do not intend to have cancer?") Nor was her definition of "totalitarianism" politically convenient. She dismissed Communism as "Fascism with a glandular and geographic difference." Once past her early youth, she fell for none of the easy sophistries of the English Left, and even as a young woman she displayed a political hardheadedness which was wholly uncharacteristic of her time.

This is dangerous stuff, and it is interesting to see how Rebecca West's feminist admirers handle it. The Virago Press, which is bringing out a complete edition of her works, chose in compiling a collection of her unpublished articles to exhume the feminist tracts which she wrote in her twenties rather than the far more significant essays and articles of her later years. "Many socialists," says Jane Marcus, editor of *The Young Rebecca,* "remember Rebecca West only for her sharp anti-communist polemics in the 1950s. It is for this reason particularly that I wanted to reprint these early political essays." (So much for intrinsic merit.) Similarly, Fay Weldon, in her monograph on Rebecca West for Penguin's "Lives of Modern Women" series, directs the novice reader to her novels, squirming past *The Meaning of Treason* as quickly as possible: "I suspect she looked too myopically through patriotic glasses, and failed to grasp the hopefulness of what she saw—as concepts of loyalty and morality, for centuries poles apart, at last began to fuse."

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This line is echoed throughout the pages of *Rebecca West: A Life,* in which every opportunity is taken to diminish Rebecca West's mature political convictions as a quirk, an idiosyncrasy, even a sign of mental disturbance. ("She was, in New York, appallingly run down in health and spirits, and obsessed with the theories of communist infiltration which had been her subject matter for the preceding months.") The proportions of Miss Glendinning's book, which deliberately stresses "the early and middle years," also serve to obscure the fully formed writer in favor of the impassioned young controversialist of feminist legend.

The problem with this approach, aside from the inevitable distortions which it imposes on the story of Rebecca West's life, is that it emphasizes that part of her work which is least likely to last. The rapidity with which Victoria Glendinning glosses over much of the later work diminishes the interest of the book as a whole. *The Court and the Castle,* for instance, is written off in a one-sentence footnote. Rebecca West remarked in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* that her work "could not fuse to make a picture of a writer, since the interstices were too wide." In the absence of an adequate consideration of her literary and political views, this rueful self-description becomes all too accurate.

The feminists, to be sure, lack the perspective necessary to see Rebecca West whole. Nor is Glendinning particularly helpful in this regard, given her apparent ignorance of modern European and American politics. Her handling of the Hiss case is typical. Though she quotes Whittaker Chambers's characterization of Dame Rebecca as "a conservative by cell structure," she fails to note that Chambers was the author of the remark, disposing of him elsewhere with a glancing reference to "the accusations of spying for the Russians made by Whittaker Chambers against Alger Hiss." Nor does she mention the lengthy essay on Chambers's memoir *Witness* which Dame Rebecca published in *The Atlantic* in 1952, perhaps the single most perceptive discussion of Chambers to appear to date.

Fortunately, Victoria Glendinning's political obtuseness has not prevented her from writing a readable book. Not that *Rebecca West: A Life* is a masterpiece of the biographer's art. One feels certain that the "short" biography Miss Glendinning was asked to write was intended to be a brief life, a *tour de force* of penetration and grace similar in approach to Rebecca West's own book on St. Augustine. Instead, Glendinning has given us a book of awkward length, neither short enough to be graceful nor long enough to be inclusive. Important episodes are given short shrift or, in the case of Evelyn Waugh's 1956 libel suit against the publisher and printers of the revised English edition of *The Meaning of Treason,* omitted altogether.

Even more important is Miss Glendinning's failure to provide any kind of sustained discussion of Rebecca West's work. Her reputation has been in eclipse for a number of years. and while her politics are in large part responsible, the fugitive nature of the literary genres in which she regularly worked is equally to blame. Rebecca West herself analyzed this problem shrewdly when she told a graduate student in search of thesis fodder that "I was a writer wholly unsuitable for her purpose" because "the bulk of my writing was scattered through American and English periodicals," adding that she "had never used my writing to make a continuous disclosure of my own personality to others, but to discover for my own edification what I knew about various subjects to me."

Still, there is enough information here to give the reader a fairly solid grasp of the high points of Rebecca West's eventful life. Whatever Victoria Glendinning's political agendas, she strikes exactly the right note for a good popular biography: sympathetic but candid. Though her book is finally inadequate, it does a substantial number of things well enough. One awaits with considerable interest the full-length biography which Stanley Olson is writing, but at least Miss Glendinning has now made it possible to consider in some detail the main

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themes of Rebecca West's work side by side with the details of her long and troubled private life.

Cicely Isabel Fairfield was born in 1892 on December 21, a birthday which, to her grim amusement, she shared with Stalin. Isabella Fairfield, her mother, was a talented pianist who, like most gifted women musicians of reasonably good family during the days of Queen Victoria, opted for an amateur career as "musical governess" before retiring altogether to commence what she doubtless expected to be a full-time career as housewife. Charles Fairfield, Cicely's father, was an Anglo-Irish soldier who took up journalism, the traditional refuge of lost souls. A compulsive philanderer who liked to gamble, he opposed women's suffrage but favored women's education. As a result, Cicely, his youngest daughter, would later claim to be unable to remember a time "when I had not a rough idea of what was meant by capitalism, socialism, individualism, anarchism, liberalism and conservatism."

Charles Fairfield abandoned his family in 1901, travelling to Sierra Leone to open a pharmaceutical factory. Though this venture lasted for only four months, he never lived with Isabella or his three daughters again. He died in 1906, leaving his family to eke out a shabby-genteel living in Edinburgh. Not surprisingly, his daughters all affiliated themselves with the feminist movement at early ages. Cicely first appeared in print in 1907 with a letter to *The Scotsman* entitled "Women's Electoral Claims." At the age of seventeen she entered the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Her efforts there were undistinguished and she left after three terms, intending to find work in the theater but drifting, like her father before her, into the world of journalism.

Cicely's first piece for *The Freewoman,* a feminist weekly edited by Dora Marsden, appeared under her own name in 1911. She soon adopted the pseudonym "Rebecca West," the name of a character in Henrik Ibsen's play *Rosmersholm.* Though she later claimed that the name had been chosen on the spur of the moment and signified nothing, few believed her. "Rebecca West" was the mistress of a married man who induced her lover to join her in a suicide pact. "Live, work, act," she says at one point in the play. "Don't sit here and brood and grope among insoluble enigmas." The life of the "real" Rebecca West would prove to be no less sensational.

"Rebecca West found her 'voice' as a critical writer," Victoria Glendinning says, "the moment she found a platform." For all their obvious immaturities, her early essays contain ample evidence of a lively mind, a sharp tongue, and a distinct knack for skewering overrated writers. ("Writers on the subject of August Strindberg have hitherto omitted to mention that he could not write.") What is missing from these pieces is not so much a "voice" as a distinctive point of view. While one can hardly expect a fresh *Weltanschauung* from a writer just out of her teens, the young Rebecca West, however engaging, was still very much an unfinished woman, a writer lacking in experience.

Experience, to put it mildly, was what she got when she hooked up with H. G. Wells in 1913. Wells was fully launched by this time on the long series of sexual liaisons which provided him with much of the material for the novels of his middle years, but even he seems to have been taken aback by the young woman he met not long after she reviewed his 1912 novel *Marriage* for *The Freewoman.* "Of course," Rebecca West wrote, "he is the old maid among novelists; even the sex obsession that lay clotted on *Ann Veronica* and *The New Machiavelli* like cold white sauce was merely old maids' mania, the reaction towards the flesh of a mind too long absorbed in airships and colloids."

Such brisk assurance, carrying as it did the clear suggestion of dark prodigies of youthful fornication, was too good to resist, and Wells promptly invited himself to lunch. The young woman he met, he remembered many years later, was a "curious mixture of maturity and infantilism" with "a fine dark brow and dark, expressive, troubled eyes." She was also a virgin, and she must have

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seen in Wells an opportunity to leap boldly into the sexual unknown. "I suppose I shall have to do what you want me to," he wrote her after their second meeting. "But anyhow I mean to help you all I can in your great adventure."

The story of her tempestuous affair with Wells has been widely and inaccurately recounted. Gordon Ray's *H. G. Wells and Rebecca West* was vetted by Rebecca West herself, while Anthony West's accounts of the romance, one explicitly fictional, the other ostensibly biographical, are filled with the suppurating malice of an unhappy child grown into a resentful adult. Victoria Glendinning, however, has no particular axe to grind, and it seems likely that the Rebecca West of her account is something close to the Rebecca West who, finding herself pregnant after her second sexual encounter with Wells, suddenly discovered that there was no place in his glamorous world of new Machiavellis and men like gods for a scared girl who was about to become an unmarried mother.

Granted, one comes away from *Rebecca West: A Life* feeling that Rebecca West had clearly set her cap for H. G. Wells. ("During the next few days," she wrote him prior to their becoming lovers in 1913, "I shall either put a bullet through my head or commit something more shattering to myself than death.") But one also feels certain that she never expected the great writer of her daydreams to be a selfish lout who would casually use her body for his own sensual purposes. Wells's romantic "passades" were invariably undertaken on the assumption that, passion spent, he would return to Jane, his long-suffering wife. He put too high a price on hearth and home to seriously consider any alternative. "She stabilized my life," Wells wrote after Jane's death. "She gave it a home and dignity. She preserved its continuity." Rebecca West could offer Wells nothing of the sort, and though he assured her that he would provide for Anthony, their child, he never had the slightest intention of divorcing Jane, much less marrying Rebecca.

Rebecca West's early life dramatized in the crudest, most literal way imaginable the fact that feminist ideas have practical consequences. The miracle was that she was able to overcome those consequences and establish herself as a journalist of significance. Within a few years of Anthony West's birth, Rebecca West was known throughout Great Britain and America as one of the most provocative literary journalists of the day.

By 1930, Rebecca West had published five books. Two of them, *Henry James* and *The Strange Necessity,* were works of literary criticism, while the other three, *The Return of the Soldier, The Judge,* and *Harriet Hume,* were novels. The novels are garrulous and sentimental exercises which, though technically competent, suggest no obvious flair for the medium. "Ibsen," Rebecca West later wrote, "converted me to the belief that it is ideas which make the world go round." Unfortunately, her novels, early and late, give the distinct impression of having been written, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot on Henry James, by a very fine mind which is being continually violated by ideas, all of which are promptly incorporated into the work at hand without obvious regard to relevance.

The literary criticism, on the other hand, shows enormous progress in the direction of shapeliness and style. Whatever its retrospective inadequacies, it impressed Rebecca West's elders mightily. "Rebecca," George Bernard Shaw wrote in 1916, "is an extremely clever young woman whose critical writings in the papers have been startling everyone for the last few years. Rebecca can handle a pen as brilliantly as ever I could, and much more savagely." Praise like this helped to make Rebecca West a remarkably successful popular journalist. Like Evelyn Waugh, she acquired the habits of Fleet Street with surprising ease. "But that is journalism," she said in 1947 after meeting a tight deadline for a piece about the marriage of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip, "an ability to meet the challenge of filling the space."

Having established her independence as a writer, Rebecca West eventually declared

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her independence from H. G. Wells, with whom she had kept up a fitful, and often humiliating, liaison for several years. Though she retained her respect for Wells to the end of her life, their affair also fostered in her the beginnings of a deep sense of disillusionment about the possibility of successful relations between men and women, a disillusionment which, like her writing, would ripen after her marriage in 1930.

"My childhood and my girlhood," Rebecca West wrote in 1939, "were overshadowed by the tragedies of my elders, and my twenties were a nightmare of overwork and harassment. Not till my marriage, and I married in my late thirties, did I have one human being close to me who ever thought of saving me fatigue or pain or responsibility." Henry Maxwell Andrews, the man Rebecca West married, was a Scottish merchant banker of obscure ancestry who dabbled in occupation after occupation without finding professional contentment. Though he was, in Victoria Glendinning's words, "formidably well-informed," he was deeply in debt and buying stock on margin when he met Rebecca West.

"At last," a friend of hers remarked as they left on their honeymoon, "she is going away with someone who will buy her railway ticket. Hitherto, she has bought everyone else's." But the "security" Rebecca West craved turned out to be as unavailable from Henry Andrews as it had been from the other men in her life. Andrews, like her father and H. G. Wells, was a philanderer, and he provided final confirmation of her increasingly bleak view of the male sex. "What you don't understand," she wrote to a friend in 1968,

> is that I *understand* the male attitude but don't *like* it. I don't think it's pleasant for a husband whose wife is successful to feel an irresistible compulsion to go off with a tart . . . . Isn't the male attitude mean, silly and dirty? What I feel is the catch about this vale of tears is that there is something so desperately unloveable, even unlikeable, about the male sex.

Three years after marrying Henry Andrews, she produced the first book of her maturity, *St. Augustine* (1933). Commissioned as part of the Appleton Biographies series, this short book, which she described as "a simple account of Augustine's personal life and background," is comparable in approach and achievement to G. K. Chesterton's *St. Thomas Aquinas,* which appeared in the same year. In *St. Augustine,* Rebecca West elaborates for the first time the two central ideas upon which her later work would be built. Ironically, these ideas are based on a pair of celebrated theological heresies. The Pelagian heresy is the belief that "man's will is free, and that he can use it to become virtuous and be rewarded by God." Reflecting on this notion, Rebecca West concluded that

> we cannot claim to have free will. We exercise what looks like a free faculty of choice, but the way we exercise that faculty depends on our innate qualities and our environment, and these always bind us in some way or another to the neuroses which compel us to choose death rather than life . . . . Augustine's view that we are full of original sin, that we do not enjoy the free use of our wills, and must link ourselves to the eternal if we are to be saved, is at least a symbolic interpretation of something that the most secular-minded must allow to be true.

By contrast, Rebecca West espoused a dualistic vision of good and evil which she consistently and correctly described as Manichaean. But she simultaneously rejected St. Augustine's conviction that man must atone for his "enmeshment in matter" through suffering and asceticism. The Augustinian idea of atonement through suffering, she believed, "causes the pain of history, the wars, the persecutions, the economic systems which put many to the torture of poverty and raise up rich men only to throw them down, the civilizations that search for death as soon as opportunities for fuller life open before them."

There is, as Victoria Glendinning points out in *Rebecca West: A Life,* an antinomy

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inherent in Rebecca West's reading of St. Augustine: "She blamed Manichaeism as a human construct for causing man's self-destructiveness, while seeming, often, to accept its validity as an *a priori* interpretation of the universe." But whatever the logical inconsistency of her private brand of Manichaeism, it nevertheless provided her with precisely what she had heretofore lacked: a distinctive point of view from which to discuss the modern world. "[E]very phrase I read of his," she would later write of St. Augustine, "sounds in my ears like the sentence of my doom and the doom of my age." Sentence having been pronounced, Rebecca West thereupon proceeded to sit down and write her masterpiece.

Black Lamb and Grey Falcon, published in 1941, uses the unlikely medium of the travel book to fuse history, cultural criticism, and political analysis into a single, all-encompassing whole. Her method is characteristically personal. *Black Lamb* is something like what a familiar essayist would write if he were suddenly inspired to churn out a 500,000-word book. The loose structure of a trip to Yugoslavia serves as the pretext for a lengthy series of digressions in which all of the themes which will dominate her work for the rest of her life are commingled. Doubtless inspired by her recent immersion in St. Augustine, Rebecca West here essays the grand manner to extraordinary effect, combining the ornate clauses of Henry James with the weighty cadences of the King James Bible to produce for the first time the fully realized prose style of her later writings.

"I resolved to put on paper," Rebecca West wrote, "what a typical Englishwoman felt and thought in the late nineteen-thirties when, already convinced of the inevitability of the second Anglo-German war, she had been able to follow the dark waters of that event back to its source." This source, she discovered, was deep within the divided heart of man:

> Only part of us is sane: only part of us loves pleasure and the longer day of happiness, wants to live to our nineties and die in peace, in a house that we built, that shall shelter those who come after us. The other half of us is nearly mad. It prefers the disagreeable to the agreeable, loves pain and its darker night despair, and wants to die in a catastrophe that will set back life to its beginnings and leave nothing of our house save its blackened foundations.

Rebecca West in 1941 was all too plainly gagging at the "wet" liberalism of her illustrious contemporaries. "They want to be right, not to do right," she maintained in a passage from *Black Lamb* that recalls nothing so much as George Orwell's unforgettable portrait of the middle-class socialist in *The Road to Wigan Pier.* "They feel no obligation to be part of the main tide of life, and if that meant any degree of pollution they would prefer to divert themselves from it and form a standing pool of purity." The intensity with which she finally rejected the shallow progressivism in which she had been raised brought her to a profound understanding of the nature of totalitarianism. At a time when Shaw and Wells were still open admirers of Stalin, Rebecca West, who saw no difference between totalitarianism of the Left and of the Right, recognized that

> [Mussolini] made himself dictator without binding himself by any of the contractual obligations which civilized man has imposed on his rulers in all credible phases of history and which give power a soul to be saved . . . . The long servitude in the slums has left this kind of barbarian without any knowledge of what man does when he ceases to be violent, except for a few uncomprehending glimpses of material prosperity. He therefore can conceive of no outlet for his energies other than the creation of social services which artificially and unnaturally spread this material prosperity among the population, in small doses that keep them happy and dependent; and, for his second string, there is the performance of fantasias on the single theme of brute force.

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Like Orwell, Rebecca West would continue to call herself a socialist for the rest of her life, and there would always be an element of what Victoria Glendinning calls "romantic idealism" in her work. But this idealism would continue to butt up against the hard rock of reality. ("It is often hard," she wrote in *Black Lamb,* "to tell the difference between history and the smell of skunk.") The claims of reality became even more urgent when she subsequently turned to an examination of the way in which the rule of law stands in opposition to the forces of totalitarianism.

Having learned from St. Augustine that "we are full of original sin . . . and must link ourselves to the eternal if we are to be saved," Rebecca West accordingly rejected the Shavian notion that "the past was of value only in so far as it gave indications of how to annul the present and create a future which had no relation to it." This historical perspective gave her an interest in the rule of law which no other prominent woman writer has shared, an interest so comprehensive that it turns up in such unlikely places as, say, her discussion of *Hamlet* in *The Court and the Castle:*

> Yet Hamlet's father's ghost has authority over the reader . . . because he is the symbol of a reality. He represents tradition. His insistence that Hamlet should avenge his murder is an invocation of the Rule of Law, a warning that the existence of our kind depends on observance of the Commandments. When Hamlet fails to obey, he rejects the accumulated experience of his race; he has refused to aid society by transmitting a message; and he has taken as his government his individual impulses.

After the war, Rebecca West turned to the field of legal journalism, covering the Nuremberg trials for *The New Yorker* and writing about a gallery of modern traitors ranging from William Joyce ("Lord Haw-Haw") to Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean. The sheer literary finish of *The Meaning of Treason* (1947) and *A Train of Powder* (1955), in which these pieces are collected, is exceptional. Never has magazine journalism been so resonant and magisterial. But style is a purely secondary consideration here. These pieces transcend mere reportage, however brilliant, to touch on something far more fundamental: the significance of political loyalty in the modern world.

To her eternal credit, Rebecca West refused to romanticize Communist treachery. To Klaus Fuchs's claim that his existence as a spy constituted a form of "controlled schizophrenia," she retorted earthily that "he had rediscovered the fact that it often serves a man's immediate ends to lie and cheat: nothing more than that." Her final judgment on the postwar traitors was tarter still:

> The man tempted to become a traitor will be helped if public opinion keeps it clear before him that treachery is a sordid and undignified form of crime . . . . [W]e should abandon all sentimentality in our views of the traitor, and recognize him as a thief and a liar. He may be other things; a criminal is very rarely simply a criminal. But to a marked degree the traitor is also a thief and a liar.

In order to grasp the full impact of this line of argument, one need only recall E. M. Forster's famous remark about the comparative merits of betraying one's friends and one's countrymen. Rebecca West had long since repudiated this kind of moral relativism. She elevated the rule of law over Forster's rule of personal relationships because she knew that the alternative was moral and political chaos. Unlike the majority of her contemporaries, Rebecca West, who accepted the existence of evil, did not hesitate to brand treason as evil, and she recognized that the Communist, for whom treason is an article of faith, is all the more evil for his sincerity.

"She no longer sees the solution," Jane Marcus wrote of Rebecca West shortly before her death in 1983, "in terms of dogma or simple ideologies. But in one essential respect she has not changed: she remains a

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feminist." In the narrowest sense, of course, this is true. Rebecca West felt to the end of her life that men oppressed women, that there was something essentially "unloveable, even unlikeable" about them, that their lunacy had brought savage waves of death and destruction to the world. "If I were young again," she wrote in her diary in 1975, "I would deliberately (and against my nature) choose to be a lesbian."

But Rebecca West was never an adherent to any ideology, least of all the total ideology of modern feminism. She abandoned the parochial concerns of the suffragettes early on and never looked back. She knew that the only way to impose order on a world made mad by the lunatic impulses of men was through the rule of law, not through utopian idealism.

Anyone who elevates the rule of law to such a point of philosophical primacy must also *feel* it as an emotional imperative. The perception cannot be purely intellectual. In the case of Evelyn Waugh, for instance, it is not necessary to know anything about his life to sense that his fear of chaos was far more than a matter of religious doctrine. Rebecca West's life, as Victoria Glendinning amply demonstrates, was similarly ridden with the threat of chaos. Her stormy relationship with Anthony West contained clear (and mutual) elements of paranoia, while her marriage to Henry Andrews, and the attendant sexual crises which arose from it, bordered at times on the tragic. One's heart sinks to read this sentence from Rebecca West's unpublished memoirs: "I was never able to lead the life of a writer because of these two over-riding factors, my sexual life, or rather death, and my politics."

Wherein lay her salvation? Early in her career, Rebecca West wrote of "the strange necessity" of artistic expression. This necessity never left her, never diminished in intensity. In *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* she recalls the experience of listening to Mozart during a German air raid:

> We start a gramophone record, and from it there radiates the small white star of light that is, say, *"Deh vieni, non tardar,"* the song of Susanna as she waits in the garden for the happy night to fall, at the end of *The Marriage of Figaro.* There bursts across the whole sky above, there bursts across the earth below, the huge red star of light that is a high-explosive bomb. Surely the huge red star will consume the small white star. But it is not so. On the contrary, the huge red star withers at once . . . . [T]he attention does not relinquish the small white star of the song, which is correct, permanent, important. "Yes," we say in our beings, heart and mind and muscles fused in listening, "this is what matters."

Encountering again the high seriousness of this genuinely heroic passage, one is flooded with nostalgia for an age in which writers like Rebecca West could flourish. To learn about the life of the woman who wrote these lines only serves to personalize their heroism. By confronting the chaos of her private life, by defending her sanity through the practice of art, Rebecca West came to understand the meaning of chaos in the larger world. To the very end of her long life, she faced each day with immense gusto. "Her life, even now," one of her last housekeepers said, "is black and white and crimson and purple and wild." She was, in the truest sense of the word, a liberated woman. No ideology can provide so profound a liberation.

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O'Keeffe in the capital

by Jed Perl

Arriving in Washington today, we still see what Henry James saw at the beginning of the century, "a city of palaces and monuments and gardens, symmetries and circles and far radiations." Washington remains a mix of the democratic and the imperial, and if for James the capital was "the place of business, the estate-office" for "a huge flourishing Family," the family is now only larger and more contentious—it's the whole Western world.

James was back in the United States in 1904 after almost a lifetime passed in Europe, and what struck him in Washington was how little the handsome public buildings told a visitor about the life of the nation. At the Capitol he saw three American Indians, "arrayed in neat pot-hats, shoddy suits and light overcoats." They were a demonstration "of what the Government can do with people with whom it is supposed able to do nothing." And thinking back on James Fenimore Cooper and his Leather-Stocking Tales, a favorite of his youth, James suddenly recognized in those Indians-turned-tourists "an image in itself immense, but foreshortened and simplified —reducing to a single smooth stride the bloody footsteps of time. One rubbed one's eyes, but there, at its highest polish, shining in the beautiful day, was the brazen face of history, and there, all about one, immaculate, the printless pavements of the State."

The stones of Washington still pretty much don't speak, and crisscrossing the Mall today (which may be the worst-kept ceremonial park in the West) we visitors still see vistas that are hard and clear, built up of "the printless pavements of the State." As a city that we take in with our eyes, Washington reveals a good deal less about the nation's history than New York or Boston or maybe even Santa Fe. Washington lacks a settled history; it lacks a compelling aesthetic dimension. On both counts it's an unlikely center for the study and appreciation of art. Yet Washington has become in recent years a capital of American culture, a city second to none in its riches in painting, if not yet in sculpture and the decorative arts.

The painting collection at the National Gallery is now the best one-stop collection in the country, far broader in its range than that of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Washington is also home to some of the great small museums of the world, including, right there on the crowd-congested Mall, the Freer Gallery, where the Oriental paintings on paper and silk are actually exhibited without a crowd-proof cover of plex or glass. As much as New York, Washington is shaping the American tourists' idea of what going to an art museum is all about. This is a development one could have probably predicted some decades ago when the Mellon family and Samuel Kress began to transform the National Gallery into a major-league museum. What no one could have counted on was the National Gallery's more

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than occasional willingness to challenge the average museum-goer with shows addressed to the connoisseur. This fall, along with the crowd-pleasing retrospectives of Georgia O'Keeffe and Berthe Morisot, the National Gallery was host to "The Art of Rosso Fiorentino," a large, intellectually demanding collection of Mannerist drawings, prints, ceramics, and tapestries.

Looking back over the past decade, it's the National Gallery that has sponsored not only the glitziest of the glitz shows, *Treasure Houses of Great Britain,* but also some of the really unexpected and unforgettable exhibitions. While the Met has given us such major but mainstream events as Manet and Van Gogh, the National has answered the cognoscenti's dreams with a Watteau retrospective (planned in conjunction with the Louvre) and the first-ever gathering of Matisse's work of the Twenties (a National Gallery exclusive). If both exhibitions were marred by traces of the wrong kind of showmanship—those *House and Garden*-colored walls at Watteau, the mega-aura of Matisse, which was padded out with too much pre-Nice work—these were a very small price to pay for the kinds of shows that we find ourselves still talking about months and years after they've been taken down from the walls. Could it be that the National Gallery is actually less of a hostage to the box office and the marketplace than New York's Met? Could the National Gallery turn out to be our elite art institution, a museum whose sense of quality has nothing to do with the politics of left, center, or right but simply aims to offer us the highest aesthetic experience available in America today?

With the Georgia O'Keeffe retrospective, the National Gallery is very much in its crowd-pleasing mode.[1] Visitors line up outside the entrance to the East Wing beneath a huge banner, and on the way up to the show they pass by photo blow-ups of Georgia O'Keeffe's beloved Southwestern landscape and of Georgia O'Keeffe herself. But this show isn't a crowd-pleaser that plays down to the crowd. The National Gallery has somehow managed to give both the early modernist O'Keeffe and the later mythic O'Keeffe their due. Once you're in the galleries, the bare white walls and the uniform silver frames set a subdued, sensuously elegant mood. Though the selection of works is erratic and the semi-chronological arrangement of the galleries is a little bizarre, there are some inspired installations—some things that couldn't be bettered, such as the small room that contains a group of the pinkish, curvaceous abstractions of 1918-19. Meanwhile the catalogue that the National has produced, called *Georgia O'Keeffe: Art and Letters* and containing an album of reproductions and a group of one hundred and twenty-five of O'Keeffe's own letters, gives the public something to take home and *read,* avoids the scholarly overkill of museum catalogues of recent years, and makes an honorable addition to the small but choice shelf full of books by and about O'Keeffe. (Also out in time for the show is *Georgia O'Keeffe: One Hundred Flowers,* a gift book if there ever was one, measuring thirteen-and-a-half by sixteen inches.[2] *One Hundred Flowers,* in full color, may not be everybody's cup of tea, but it's like nothing else we've ever seen, a theme-and-variations extravaganza that's drop-dead chic, druggily hypnotic, and utterly weird. Talk about flower power!)

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1 "Georgia O'Keeffe: 1887-1986" is on view at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. through February 21. From there it travels to the Art Institute of Chicago (March 5 through June 19), the Dallas Museum of Art (July 31 through October 16), and the Metropolitan Museum in New York (November 19 through February 5, 1989). The exhibition is organized by Jack Cowart, curator of twentieth-century art at the National Gallery, and Juan Hamilton. The catalogue, entitled *Georgia O'Keeffe: Art and Letters,* was written by Jack Cowart and Juan Hamilton (letters were selected and annotated by Sarah Greenough) and published by the National Gallery in co-operation with the New York Graphic Society (306 pages, $22 in paper).

2 *Georgia O'Keeffe: One Hundred Flowers,* edited by Nicholas Callaway; Alfred A. Knopf, 160 pages, $100.

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Born in 1887, O'Keeffe was a painter of consequence for about fifteen years, from the abstractions she did just before she turned thirty, partly inspired by Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art,* through to the flowers and skyscrapers and skulls she had done by the early 1930s. O'Keeffe had the benefit of some of the most advanced art education that America had to offer early in the century (she studied with John Vanderpoel at the Art Institute of Chicago and with Arthur Wesley Dow at Teacher's College in New York), and she was a sharp-eyed visitor to Alfred Stieglitz's galleries long before she became one of his star artists and his wife. Her best work would have been impossible without the new freedom that had been won for art by Europeans since the late nineteenth century, but if O'Keeffe adopted the imaginative liberty of a cosmopolitan modernism, her sui generis concoctions of flattened-out form and photographic modeling always bore the stamp of a fundamentally provincial sensibility. Despite the eerie voluptuousness of her subjects, there's nothing voluptuous about O'Keeffe the painter. Save in a few of the early works in watercolor, her paint handling is invariably dry, flat, almost perfunctory. When she announces, in the autobiographical fragments published in 1976, that her work "had nothing to do with Cézanne or anyone else," she's glorying in her insistence on following her own line—on not being seduced by the great European experiment.

The charcoal drawings of 1915, the mystical symmetries of *Series 1, No. 8* (1919) and *Pink Moon and Blue Lines* (1923), and all the unfolding petals may barely count as compositions, but they are the kind of personal icons that stop you dead in your tracks. The power of this work depends on the bold assertion of the strange and unexpected. Each small, intensely felt impression is insisted upon, is borne in upon the viewer. Composition in the traditional sense—composition as practiced by a John Marin or a Marsden Hartley—was probably way beyond O'Keeffe's capacities. It didn't matter. She made a virtue of her weaknesses, went her own way, and became our greatest painter-seer.

If O'Keeffe's semi-abstract style is in certain respects folk-artish, a homegrown curiosity, it also contains a mix of abstract and representational elements that has its origins in the Parisian modernism of the first quarter of our century. The difference between O'Keeffe and a Europe-oriented semi-abstractionist such as the early Hartley is that Hartley likes the high drama of modernism, the sense of being involved in a clash of traditions. With O'Keeffe, semi-abstraction exists outside of history; it's forever and never-never. Semi-abstraction is also a bit of a mesmerist's trick for her, with each side of the abstract-representational equation disguising the weaknesses of the other. O'Keeffe can't invent anything but the most elementary abstract structures, and she probably depends too much on naturalistic modeling to give the forms some bite, some immediacy. This is a delicate balancing act of a style, in which the inert, two-dimensional-design character of the images is all that prevents that super-real modeling from veering off into banality. When O'Keeffe goes overboard with the three-dimensional element, she destroys our sense of the picture as something that's dreamed-up, imagined. When she does standard modeling, as in the still life *Grapes on White Dish—Dark Rim* (1920), she's no better than Regionalists like Thomas Hart Benton—her technique is that academic. The Southwestern landscapes of the Thirties reflect a genuine love of the earth, but as paintings they're unconvincing; here O'Keeffe's unwillingness to look into Cézanne really shows.

Oddly enough, when O'Keeffe's work plummets—this is in the Thirties—one still doesn't exactly see her as a failure. There's no fury or energy to her bad paintings, perhaps because she'd never gone very deeply into the culture of painting to begin with. She's the opposite of an artist like Max Weber, who learned about painting straight from Matisse and lost what he'd known in a nightmare of miscalculations and over-elaborated effects. O'Keeffe doesn't become a

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weak painter—she just loses her poetic impulse, her gleaming inspiration. Perhaps it was a question of having a small personal capital of ideas which she drew on for too long, until there was nothing left in the account. By the Forties she's producing the ghosts of O'Keeffes. There are semi-recoveries, such as *It was Red and Pink* (1959), but also outrageous howlers, such as the late *Sky Above Clouds* series. At some point her writing is more effective than her painting. I'd rather read O'Keeffe's description of the famous door in the wall in the adobe house in Abiquiu than see the oils she did, which are so embarrassing in their greedy annexation of post-Abstract Expressionist painting ideas. *My Last Door* (1954), in the collection of the designer Calvin Klein, is all stark, handsome intervals; it might as well be the set for a Calvin Klein commercial.

And yet you don't leave the O'Keeffe show feeling let down. Her slow, deliberate sensuality is there to the end. To the end her mood is quasi-religious, romantic, reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich, with whom she shared a taste for iconic crosses that refer to some ambiguous, anti-institutional idea of Christianity. O'Keeffe and Friedrich are middle-class mystics; they give their fantasies a crisp, concrete form. And just as Friedrich's romanticism is knit inextricably into the Biedermeier sensibility of early nineteenth-century Germany, O'Keeffe's romanticism can't be separated from the Art Deco taste of the America of the Twenties and Thirties, the years when she achieved her great fame.

The public is going to the National Gallery to see O'Keeffe's paintings, but it's also going to make contact with the woman herself. In her journey from Wisconsin and Virginia and Texas to New York City and Lake George and Abiquiu lies one of America's great true adventure tales. Of course we grow weary of the legend. I for one find the alliance with Stieglitz somehow uninteresting, too much a matter of two egoists on an ego trip together. And yet you cannot deny that this is one of those marriages-within-modernism that are so extraordinary a part of the art life of the beginning of the century. Whatever the particulars of their life together, O'Keeffe and Stieglitz, along with Robert and Sonia Delaunay and Jean Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp in France, mark a new era in male-female relations. For the first time in history a man and a woman are partners in art as well as in love.

O'Keeffe was, and very definitely felt herself to be, a feminist, the odd-woman-out of the Stieglitz circle. In her writings she liked to set herself off from "the men," and suggest that some of her strength had to do with her sex. At the same time she hated to have her work discussed in terms of female imagery. (It's for this reason that she rejected Paul Rosenfeld's wonderful O'Keeffe essay in *Port of New York,* with its evocation of the slowly unfolding rhythm of her art.) I see a connection between O'Keeffe's distaste for gender-linked interpretations of her work and Balthus's equally virulent distaste for sexual interpretations of his. Both artists recoil from the idea that something so deeply personal can be labeled, given a tag. And what, really, is there to say about O'Keeffe's female imagery except, "Yes, of course"? It's obvious that her forms are closely related to female anatomy (as well as to a culturally determined female taste for flowers, for soft things), and it's natural that an artist in the confessional mode would draw on these kinds of sources to some degree. While painting by painting O'Keeffe is a less various artist than that other mystic of the Stieglitz group, Arthur Dove, O'Keeffe's narrower achievement surpasses Dove's by adding something stubbornly original to the history of art.

If O'Keeffe spent a good deal of her life proving that she was somehow more than human—a High Priestess of Sante Fe chic, and all of that—she had good reason, because for a woman of her time and place what passed as merely human often turned out to be considerably less than human. I think Henry James would be interested by O'Keeffe's presence there on the Mall. She'd been a teenager when he made his last visit

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to America to 1904, and as an artist she'd had to make do with the dearth of fixed cultural institutions that James analyzed in his book on Hawthorne. O'Keeffe knew about nineteenth-century America and as one who passed much of her life in the Southwest she knew about those "bloody footsteps of time." When Paul Rosenfeld, in 1924, predicted that the tide of art was beginning to flow toward America, O'Keeffe was the heroine of the story—a story told in *Port of New York* in cadences that were in part borrowed from the style of Henry James. O'Keeffe's life has many of the elements of the unending argument between convention and innovation that interested James in both his fiction and nonfiction. She was absolutely a product of the American earth, and along with that she was an artist, a bohemian, a feminist, a great lady. She lived all these roles to the hilt, and had, from the evidence of her own writings, a subtle humor about her driving ambition and her iconoclastic independence. At the National Gallery, Georgia O'Keeffe gave the public what it had every right to demand: a story set firmly in the American landscape, in which individualism triumphs as a democratic ideal.

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Wordsworth on Forty-second Street

by Bruce Bawer

Few, if any, movements in the history of our literature have been as complex, or as consistently the center of controversy, as has English Romanticism. No two observers see precisely the same thing when they look at it; indeed, no two Romantics saw it in quite the same way. "There are *many* Romanticisms," wrote the critic and scholar A. O. Lovejoy. In his *Guide through the Romantic Movement,* Ernest Bernbaum listed twenty-eight definitions of Romanticism (which he claimed to have "selected from many hundreds" propounded by distinguished critics and authors), all of them defensible, none of them easily reconciled with another. Though, as M. H. Abrams has observed, "[t]he Age of Romanticism . . . ushered in the modern world," Romanticism has become a stickier topic in the twentieth century than ever before; the classically oriented New Critics—who preferred irony and paradox to the Romantics' childlike literalness, objectivity to their subjectivity, and greatness of mind to their fullness of heart—roundly condemned Romanticism for its supposed optimism and credulity, its glorification of the self and the "Inner Voice," and its supposed rejection of reason, self-control, self-criticism, and moral responsibility. Eliot argued that the Metaphysical poets had been blessed with a unity of intellect and feeling that the Romantics failed to achieve; the Humanist critic Irving Babbitt saw Romanticism as an attempt "to discredit the analytical intellect," and his fellow Humanist Paul Elmer More complained that Romanticism consisted in "the illusion of beholding the infinite within the stream of nature itself, instead of apart from that stream."

If Romanticism in general has suffered in the twentieth century, Wordsworth in particular has had it even worse. Though Pater was able to write, at the end of the last century, that Wordsworth was "the true forerunner of the deepest and most passionate poetry of our own day," and though Arnold ranked him just below Shakespeare and Milton, contemporary criticism appears to have no place to put him. Most of those twentieth-century critics who have celebrated various Romantic poets as "visionaries" or "mystics" have not found a visionary or a mystic in Wordsworth. Keats has been idolized by a number of modern poets; Blake strongly influenced the century's major poet, Yeats, and one of its most notorious, Allen Ginsberg; and even Eliot acknowledged Coleridge as the greatest of English literary critics. But Wordsworth has been something less than a vital presence on the twentieth-century scene. He is, one might say, an Aristotelian Romantic—a poet of the soul who is nonetheless firmly grounded in everyday reality—and we live in an age whose literary movers and shakers want their Romantic poets to be Platonists: prophets and rebels, Shelleys and Blakes, Ginsbergs and Blys. Most of the (usually halfhearted) twentieth-century efforts to rehabilitate Wordsworth have involved attempts to

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make him over into something that he is not. For example, in order to make Wordsworth conform to the New Criticism's standards of poetic excellence, Cleanth Brooks devoted his essay on Wordsworth in *The Well Wrought Urn* to an unearthing of paradox and irony—those characteristics so highly prized by the New Critics—in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality." To say all of this, however, is not to suggest that Wordsworth has not had some effect upon contemporary poetry; on the contrary, his influence is discernible in the work of several young formalist poets of our day. But whether these younger poets consciously recognize Wordsworth as a model, the way a young Allen Ginsberg did Blake, is doubtful. At least it is hard to conceive of a fledgling poet in 1988 acknowledging his indebtedness to the bard of Rydal Mount.

So much, then, for the standing of Romanticism among present-day poets and critics. But its position in the consciousness of the general public is something else again. For in the mind of the typical middlebrow American, English Romanticism is to poetry pretty much what French Impressionism is to painting—that is, an accessible and appealing portion of an otherwise largely alien and forbidding artistic territory. The same sort of people who are bored by Rembrandt and confused by Kandinsky, but captivated by Monet and Cézanne, tend likewise to be as comfortable with the more familiar anthology pieces of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats as they are uncomfortable with, say, the best of Spenser, Donne, and Wallace Stevens. Knowing this to be the case, one could hardly help wondering whether the heavily publicized and much-celebrated recent exhibition at the New York Public Library, "William Wordsworth and the Age of English Romanticism,"[1] would in some respects follow in the footsteps of "A Day in the Country: Impressionism and the French Landscape." This 1984 exhibition, which appeared in this country at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago, comprised a truly spectacular collection of paintings, but the show as a whole conspicuously lacked a serious theme, a legitimate point; that the enterprise was deliberately fashioned to appeal to the sensibilities of the *hoi polloi* seemed embarrassingly obvious. In the present museological climate, it was only reasonable to be concerned that the Wordsworth exhibition, for all the treasures it reportedly contained, might partake of a similar populistic pointlessness, and that the widely heralded assemblage of Romantic-era manuscripts, letters, first editions, paintings, watercolors, drawings, and etchings might amount to little more than a crowd-pleasing grab bag of the literary and artistic Greatest Hits of two centuries ago.

For the most part, one's worries on this score evaporated soon enough once one was in the Gottesman Exhibition Hall, wending one's way among the more than three hundred items on display. Before too long it was clear that, a few significant problems notwithstanding, this show worked: to an admirable degree, the three curators, Michael C. Jaye, Robert Woof, and Jonathan Wordsworth, had put together a collection of materials that managed to capture something not only of the character of the Romantic era in England but also of the sensibility of William Wordsworth, who, both in his person and in his writings, embodied more than anyone else the temper of his times. As William Hazlitt observed (the quotation is one of many that were posted on the Gottesman's dizzyingly busy walls), "Mr. Wordsworth's genius is a pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age."

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1 "William Wordsworth and the Age of English Romanticism" was on view at the New York Public Library from October 31, 1987, through January 2, 1988. The exhibition moves to the Indiana University Art Museum in Bloomington (January 27 through March 6) and the Chicago Historical Society (April 6 through June 5). The accompanying catalogue by Jonathan Wordsworth, Michael C. Jaye, and Robert Woof is published by the Rutgers University Press (260 pages, $65).

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And what a trove of Wordsworthiana there was! Among the items on display were numerous holograph manuscripts, including drafts of "Tintern Abbey," "Composed upon Westminster Bridge," and various portions of *The Prelude*; manuscripts of Dorothy Wordsworth's journals and letters; letters to Wordsworth from his French mistress Annette Vallon; *billets-doux* between Wordsworth and his wife, Mary; and the poet's earliest surviving manuscript, of the poem "Anacreon." One could examine Wordsworth's own copy of the third volume of his *Poetical Works,* showing his inked-in latter-day revisions (much for the worse) of "It is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free," and peruse three of the thirteen known copies of the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads.* The exhibition even included the poet's eyeglasses and ink stand. And there was a wonderful letter from William and Dorothy Wordsworth to Coleridge—justly described in the exhibition catalogue as "one of the primary documents of English Romanticism"—which, on two crowded sides of a single sheet of paper, contains among other things two episodes from *The Prelude,* as well as the only known early versions of "She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways" and "Strange Fits of Passion."

Wordsworth was, moreover, only one of many Romantic-era authors and artists represented in the exhibition. There were early editions of Lamb, Southey, De Quincey, Hazlitt, and Leigh Hunt, illustrated volumes and watercolors by Blake, manuscripts of some of the most celebrated works of Coleridge, Burns, Byron, Shelley, and Keats, a portion of the manuscript of *Ivanhoe,* and first editions of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Frankenstein.* And along with the literary materials were numerous examples of the art of the period, most of them depicting either ruins or dramatic seascapes or picturesque woods or rural cottages or lakes or streams, or grandiose Alpine mountain vistas. Among the many artists represented were Cornelius Varley, Samuel Palmer, Francis Towne, and John Sell Cotman. Though most of these artists' works were charming and technically admirable, however, the artists whom one went away thinking about were Turner, Constable, and Thomas Girtin. Part of the reason for this, simply enough, was that Turner and Constable were much more fully represented than any of the other artists in the exhibition, with twenty-three and thirty works respectively to Varley's four (one of them a pencil drawing of Turner), Palmer's four, Towne's five, and Cotman's seven. But the principal reason for one's preoccupation with these three artists was that their productions—which included Turner's *Valley of Aosta,* Constable's *The Glebe Farm,* and Girtin's *White House at Chelsea* (one of only four Girtin works in the show)—were of a higher order of distinction than those of their colleagues. The last-named Girtin painting, which depicts the stark contrast between the brilliant white of a tiny waterside house and the deep blue-green and gray of the surrounding sky, water, and land, proved to be a great deal more striking than even a very fine catalogue reproduction could suggest; after seeing this picture, one could well understand Turner's perhaps apocryphal remark that had Girtin lived—he died in 1802 at age twenty-seven, two months Turner's senior—"I should have starved." (Not at all apocryphal, apparently, is Turner's response to a dealer who claimed to possess a watercolor that even Turner himself could not equal. "Then I will tell you what you have," replied Turner. "You have Tom Girtin's *White House at Chelsea.*" He was right.)

To be sure, many of the artworks featured in the exhibition were selected not only, or even primarily, because of their aesthetic value, but because of their depiction of personages, events, and settings of historical or literary interest. The show contained, for instance, compelling Thomas Phillips portraits of Blake and Byron (with the latter depicted in exotic Albanian tribal garb), and a charming posthumous portrait of Keats by William Hilton; also on display were less impressive paintings of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, and conventional drawings or engravings of Words-

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worth's hometown of Cockermouth, of his grammar-school town of Hawkshead, of his house at Rydal Mount, and (by the poet's daughter Dora) of Dove Cottage, where he lived for ten years and wrote many of his greatest poems. Fortunately, a number of the artworks on display boasted literary relevance and artistic interest in equal measure, and thus made possible a number of particularly rewarding curatorial juxtapositions. Awesome paintings of Mont Blanc by Turner and Towne, for instance, were placed in proximity to a manuscript of Shelley's powerful poem that took its name from that mountain; near Sir George Beaumont's dark, grand, and solemn painting *Peele Castle* rested a copy of Wordsworth's *Poems* (1815), opened to the likewise dark, grand, and solemn "Elegiac Stanzas," which were inspired by that painting; rainbow studies by Turner and Constable hung near a manuscript copy of Wordsworth's poem "The Rainbow" (a.k.a. "My Heart Leaps Up"); and a copy of the first American edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was opened to the majestic "Tintern Abbey" poem, while directly above the book were mounted two watercolors of the abbey's ruins, one of them a picturesque rendering by the eighteen-year-old Girtin, the other a magnificently dramatic treatment by the nineteen-year-old Turner. It was at such moments that the exhibition truly seemed to come together.

So splendid were some of the artworks in this exhibition, though, that it was rather unsettling to see them hanging in the same gallery as pictures that were valuable only as historical documents or illustrations. Nearly all of the latter pictures appeared in the first of the show's six sections, "The Age of Revolutions." Despite the extraordinary historical interest of many of the items in this section—among them, first editions of Burke, Godwin, Paine, and Wollstonecraft, paintings of Napoleon and Louis XVI, engravings of various French massacres, and a copy (one of sixteen in existence) of the first printing of the American Declaration of Independence—"The Age of Revolutions" was, if viewed from the broadest perspective, the weakest part of the exhibition. Though patently designed to provide a historical background to the works of literature and art that followed, it led one to believe (a) that the show's fundamental criteria for inclusion would be historical rather than aesthetic, and (b) that the exhibition, as it unfolded, would follow a chronological scheme of organization throughout. Neither supposition proved to be true—though it must be said at the same time, alas, that no single criterion or scheme ever established itself definitively.

On the contrary, throughout the exhibition there was a discernible tension between several very commendable but, under the circumstances, somewhat mutually contradictory motives on the part of the curators. These motives were, first, to educate the viewer in the political background and philosophical underpinnings of the Romantic movement; second, to stir the viewer's aesthetic sense with the magnificence of some of the most enduring artworks of the period; third, to excite his imagination by showing him the original manuscripts and first editions of some of the great works of English literature (which is not quite the same thing as inviting him to read, and respond aesthetically to, the literary works themselves); and fourth, to capture—or, at least, to sketch the lineaments of—what Hazlitt, in his famous phrase, referred to as "the spirit of the age." (Although the phrase served as the title of the exhibition's second section, the entire show was manifestly designed, in large part, to define this spirit.) As a result of this confusion of motives, the exhibition was less intellectually coherent and aesthetically consistent than one might have wished it to be. But then, it was a problematic hybrid from the start—a cross between your typical 1980s super-show and the sort of solid, modest book-and-manuscript exhibit that the Library has been quietly mounting on its third floor, with little publicity and no crowds, for a long, long time.

More importantly, however, Romanticism is itself a problematic subject, and one could

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hardly imagine an exhibition on the Romantic era in which an attempt to define "the spirit of the age" did *not* make for some difficulties. It was a spirit, after all, which was described, by those who took part in it, largely in terms of nebulous abstractions, several of which were contained in the headings of the show's third through sixth sections: "'The Child is Father of the Man,'" "The Discovery of Nature," "'Unity Entire,'" and "Memory, Imagination, and the Sublime." Childhood, nature, unity, memory, imagination, the sublime—long passages about these and other concepts were posted on the walls and partitions of the Gottesman. At the beginning of each section, and also at the beginning of many a sub-section, one was confronted by yet another mini-essay in which the curators waxed eloquent about one ingredient or another of the *Weltanschauung* that informed the words and images on display. But because the curators failed to integrate these concepts in any dynamic way—celebrating them in isolation, as if they were separate baubles hanging from a bracelet rather than the links of a chain—one had the feeling that to most viewers the textual material would probably be as confusing as it was enlightening. Certain key questions about Romanticism—questions that both the items on display and the exhibition format prompted one to consider—were barely addressed, let alone answered, by the curatorial text. How much of the Romantic poets' rhetoric—for example, Wordsworth's suggestion in the "Immortality" ode that infants are born with the memory of a previous spiritual existence—was deliberate hyperbole, and how much of it was the sincere, literal expression of a religious or quasi-religious belief? Did all the Romantic poets, as well as artists like Turner and Constable, really share Wordsworth's conceptions of childhood, imagination, and so forth, or were there important differences in their attitudes? Did these attitudes add up to a coherent and consistent philosophy? If they did, how did they add up? If they didn't, what does this tell us about Romanticism?

Fervent as the curators were, moreover, in their celebration of Romanticism, some of the movement's paramount contributions seemed to get lost in the shuffle. For example, it was Romanticism that established the poet's own consciousness as an acceptable subject for poetry and legitimized the direct expression in verse of personal feelings. Though many poets in the late twentieth century have made this blessing look more like a curse, the self-awareness of the poetic consciousness is in fact central to modernism. So, of course, is the lyric mode, to which the Romantic poets brought new life. To be sure, the oeuvres of the major Romantic poets are very uneven: an extraordinary amount of their work is quite as simplistic and sentimental as the Humanists and New Critics said it was, and in many of their poems self-absorption appears to have become an end in itself. Even some of the most celebrated Romantic poems are likely to strike a sensitive reader today as histrionic, naïve, or downright inconsistent with the truth of human emotions. But it must be said, at the same time, that the canon of Romanticism contains several glorious poems, poems of the sort that no major English poet had ever before composed, poems for which Romanticism should indeed be celebrated. One such work is Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" poem, in which he eulogizes nature's benevolent influence "On that best portion of a good man's life, / His little, nameless, unremembered, acts / Of kindness and of love," and attributes to nature

> that blessed mood,
> In which the burthen of the mystery,
> In which the heavy and the weary weight
> Of all this unintelligible world,
> Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
> In which the affections gently lead us on,—
> Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
> And even the motion of our human blood
> Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul:
> While with an eye made quiet by the power
> Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
> We see into the life of things.

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One irony that struck this visitor—and struck him again, even more strongly, when he read the catalogue—was the curators' apparent lack of regard for the cherished Romantic virtue of individuality. It was plainly one of the strategies of the exhibition to downplay the differences between the various Romantic poets in order to focus unwaveringly upon the common "spirit of the age" as exemplified by Wordsworth. Though this strategy is understandable, it seems to me that some attention to the dissimilarities between the major Romantics, far from destroying this focus, might have made for a richer, truer, and more vivid sense of the period. It is unfortunate, for instance, that the exhibition almost completely ignored the fact that there were significant philosophical and aesthetic disagreements between many of the poets—disagreements which made it possible for Byron to despise Wordsworth and for Wordsworth to hate Shelley. To be sure, the show did include a volume of Wordsworth's 1815 *Poems* opened to a page on which an angry William Blake had scrawled the following bit of commentary: "I see in Wordsworth the Natural Man rising up against the Spiritual Man Continually & then he is No Poet but a Heathen Philosopher at Enmity against all true Poetry or Inspiration." Despite this item's inclusion, however, it seemed alarmingly possible for a modestly educated viewer to depart the Library premises laboring under the vague impression that Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats were all basically carbon copies of Wordsworth. And the catalogue, which was written by the show's three curators (with a foreword by M. H. Abrams), is even more frustrating on this score. Reading it, one wishes devoutly that the authors had eliminated some of their more windy, abstract, and quotation-heavy passages and used the extra space to draw a few crucial critical distinctions.

To say this, however, is not to deny that the catalogue is as much a pleasure to wander through as the exhibition itself. This beautifully produced volume contains nearly two hundred very fine reproductions—mostly of artworks, though a few photographs of manuscripts and books are included—as well as a gracefully written text and a copiously annotated list of the items on display. The catalogue's principal failing is that its authors—rather than treat their subject with an intellectual depth, thoroughness, and coherence beyond that of the exhibition—have done their best to manufacture an equivalent, in book form, of the show itself. Accordingly, the catalogue contains six chapters, each borrowing its title from a section of the exhibition. As for the text, its signal virtue is that it manages smoothly to string together countless quotations from the books and manuscripts on display *and* to work in references to most of the artworks on the very pages on which they are reproduced. This is certainly an achievement of some kind, though not in literary or art criticism.

In both the exhibition and the catalogue, the grounds upon which some of the paintings were classified in one section rather than another seemed little short of arbitrary. Why should one Constable landscape (*Water-meadows at Salisbury,* for instance) have been placed under the rubric "The Discovery of Nature," while another (*Helevellyn*) appeared in "'Unity Entire,'" and a third (*Weymouth Bay*) in "Memory, Imagination, and the Sublime"? Certainly all of the concerns indicated by these section titles were reflected, in some way and to some extent, in most of the paintings; in proceeding nonetheless as if it were possible to distinguish these paintings from one another on the basis of these Big Themes, the curators, I think, contradicted one of the main ideas that they were at pains to establish: namely that, for all their variety, the chief artistic productions of the Romantic movement—whether in the visual arts or in literature—partook of a single spirit. An equally vexing problem with the exhibition was that it was not always easy to distinguish the section headings from the sub-section headings (e.g., "The Study of Nature," "Beauty and Fear," "Mutability"), which were in the same typeface and in only a slightly smaller

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type size; nor could one sometimes discern which sub-sections, and which items, belonged to which sections. On the contrary, rather than leading neatly into one another, the sections seemed to overlap, so that while "The Age of Revolutions" continued to unfold on your left, say, "The Spirit of the Age" was already underway on your right.

But enough complaints. To quibble so extensively about an exhibition that offered such splendors seems almost ungrateful. For in spite of its manifold weaknesses, "William Wordsworth and the Age of English Romanticism" was a powerfully affecting show that did capture something of the spirit—the energy, the enthusiasm, the idealism—of a movement that was too hot not to cool down. One was continually reminded how young these men were when they created some of their most enduring works: Keats, twenty-one when he wrote "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer"; Shelley, twenty-three when he wrote "Alastor"; Girtin, twenty-five when he painted *White House at Chelsea*; Wordsworth, twenty-eight when he wrote "Tintern Abbey." Indeed that place known as English Romanticism was no country for old men. It was a place of flowering, of birth; and one of the most interesting things about the exhibition was that one continually perceived, between the two-centuries-old lines of print and strokes of paint, the roots of so much that is around us now—the embryonic traces, as it were, of all the revolutions that have shaken our cultural life, for good and bad, in the long century and a half since Victoria acceded to the throne.

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Special effects, special pleading

by Martha Bayles

Eighteen years later, as he gazed out over the literary landscape, the swaggering, mustachioed Colombian called Gabriel García Márquez was to recall the remote afternoon when he slipped his magnum opus, *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* into the wax-cold, ink-smudged hands of a *New York Times* literary critic whose mother had named him John Leonard, and a great event happened that neither García Márquez's kindly mother nor the white-haired Mrs. Leonard could have foreseen, namely the Colombian's words set the North American's "mind on fire," causing jewel-bright hardback copies, followed by glittering rows of paperbacks, to replicate like dragon's teeth on the shelves of a thousand bookstores, touching off aesthetic conflagrations in a million gringo skulls that had never, in their wildest fantasies of world domination through advanced technology, dreamed of an enchantment like the new Latin American novel.

Hey, this magic realism stuff is easy, once you get the hang of it.

Toni Morrison would never put it that way. But you can bet she was impressed back in 1970, when her tentative but promising first novel, *The Bluest Eye,* was blown to obscurity by the firestorm of García Márquez. Almost immediately, she got the hang of magic realism. By 1981 she told *The New Republic* that "in general I think the South American novelists have the best of it now," and *The New Republic* credited her fiction with "a Latin American enchantment."

From the obscurity of 1970, Morrison has emerged as a literary heavyweight, teaching at prestigious colleges, exerting considerable influence over the direction of black writing as a senior editor at Random House, winning the 1978 National Book Critics Circle Award for her third novel, *Song of Solomon,* starring on the lecture circuit, and topping the best-seller list with each of her last three books. The critics, including Mrs. Leonard's son, have raved themselves hoarse over Morrison's homegrown version of Macondo, García Márquez's enchanted village where modernity has not yet demythologized the world. To my knowledge, no one has asked whether Morrison was wise in constructing such a place out of the materials of the black American experience.

Now there is a clamor of praise for Morrison's latest novel, *Beloved.*[1] With the notable exception of Stanley Crouch in *The New Republic,* the reviewers have reached new heights, or depths, of abject adoration. Thomas R. Edwards in *The New York Review of Books* proclaims Morrison to be "not just an important contemporary novelist but a major figure of our national literature." Margaret Atwood in *The New York Times*

1 *Beloved,* by Toni Morrison; Knopf, 288 pages, $18.95. Of the other novels by Toni Morrison discussed here, *The Bluest Eye* is available in paperback from Washington Square Press; *Sula, Song of Solomon,* and *Tar Baby* are available in paperback from New American Library.

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declares that *Beloved* assures Morrison's "stature as a pre-eminent American novelist, of her own or any other generation." Helen Dudar in *The Wall Street Journal* calls the novel "an amazing book, the best of [Morrison's] career." And Colin Walters in *The Washington Times* states, with a few qualifications, that "'Beloved' seems as successful as it is bold and pointed aesthetically toward the future."

In my heretical opinion, *Beloved* is a dreadful novel, final proof of Morrison's decline from high promise into fashionable mediocrity. This heresy can be defended, I believe, first by comparing *Beloved* with *The Bluest Eye,* and then by examining each of Morrison's intervening novels, so that we may understand how her embrace of magic realism has led her to neglect her strengths and indulge her weaknesses.

The Bluest Eye is a portrait of madness in Pecola Breedlove, the daughter of an impoverished, disintegrating black family living in a small city in Ohio. The book has flaws, but at its best it is an extraordinary fusion of poetic language and moral clarity. The descriptions range from simple precision (a child lying in a cold winter bed "generated a silhouette of warmth") to striking metaphor ("the tears rushed down his cheeks, to make a bouquet under his chin"). The story is told partly from the viewpoint of one of Pecola's tormentors, a classmate from a prouder, more stable black family who joins in ostracizing the Breedloves as "trifling." But it also delves into the hard lives of Pecola's parents, especially her father Cholly, himself the product of poverty, racism, and family breakup in the South.

Cholly Breedlove is an important character in Morrison's oeuvre, because she never created another like him. Abandoned in a ditch by his unmarried mother, he is retrieved by an elderly aunt who tries to raise him right. But her death leaves him unwanted, about to be farmed out to begrudging kinfolk. Sexually humiliated by local whites, and fearful that his relatives will reject him, Cholly runs away in quixotic search of the father he never knew. The pages describing this background, and Cholly's eventual meeting with his father—an angry-drunk stranger who hurls curses at Cholly before he can even state his business—are among the most austere and beautiful Morrison has ever written. Equally impressive is the scene in which the mature Cholly staggers home one Saturday afternoon, himself an angry-drunk stranger, to rape his eleven-year-old daughter on the kitchen floor.

Despite his wickedness, Cholly Breedlove should not be confused with a figure like "Mr.---," the incestuous rapist in *The Color Purple* who caused such a stir last year when Alice Walker's novel was confected into a movie by Steven Spielberg. Unlike the domineering males in Walker's "womanist" fiction, Cholly is not an ideologically conceived villain. He is an extraordinary sinner whom we are asked to love to the exact degree that we are asked to hate his sin. This equilibrium between condemnation and mercy must have cost Morrison a great deal of pain. The hard theme of *The Bluest Eye* is the degradation, and self-degradation, of desperate people perpetuating their own misery while being abandoned by the rest of society, including better-off blacks. Needless to say, the theme is even timelier today than it was eighteen years ago.

In the mid-1970s, Morrison helped edit a Random House publication called *The Black Book,* a black-history "scrapbook" which included a clipping from an 1856 issue of *The American Baptist* describing an incident in Cincinnati of a runaway slave who attempted to kill her own children rather than surrender them to slave-catchers. After striking two of the children with a shovel, the woman cut the throat of a third, and was in the act of assaulting a fourth when she was apprehended. All but one child survived, as did the woman, to be sent back to a fate she obviously considered worse than death. Morrison has said that this incident haunted her for years before she decided, in 1981, to make it the core of her first historical novel, a tale of slavery and its aftermath now published as *Beloved.*

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We can see how the clear-eyed moralist who created Cholly Breedlove might be challenged by this similar, if more extreme, tale. Like Cholly, the slave woman ties a Gordian knot of good and evil when, victimized herself, she victimizes her own children. That moralist lives on in *Beloved* to the extent that its theme is the guilt of the slave woman, Sethe. Unlike her historical predecessor, Sethe does not get sold back down the river. Instead she remains in Cincinnati until 1873, when the events of the novel begin to unfold. Despite being free, Sethe and her youngest daughter live a wretched life, cut off from their fellow blacks in a house haunted by the ghost of Beloved, the baby Sethe killed. Their wretchedness seems to be ending when Paul D, another ex-slave, shows up and attempts to become their protector by banishing the ghost. Things go well until the ghost reappears as a grown-up zombie, a mysterious woman the same age Beloved would be if she had lived. Welcomed by her lonely, uncomprehending mother and sister, the reincarnated spirit first gets rid of Paul D, then starts extracting endless favors from Sethe.

Thus summarized, the plot sounds intriguing. But *Beloved* commits the imitative fallacy by extracting endless favors from its readers. We don't have to feed, bathe, or amuse Beloved, the way Sethe does. But we do have to plow through two hundred and seventy-five pages of self-indulgent prose, like this account of Paul D's effect on women:

> Not even trying, he had become the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could. There was something blessed in his manner. Women saw him and wanted to weep—to tell him that their chest hurt and their knees did too. Strong women and wise saw him and told him things they only told each other: that way past the Change of Life, desire in them had suddenly become enormous, greedy, more savage than when they were fifteen, and that it embarrassed them and made them sad; that secretly they longed to die—to be quit of it—that sleep was more precious to them than any waking day . . . .

As much as this passage needs an editor's pencil, it might be acceptable if Paul D were convincing as a human being. But he's not. He's just a list of saintly traits, combined with a longer list of sufferings. Obviously, the clipping from *The American Baptist* was only one item in a bulging file of antebellum atrocities which Morrison decided to cram, willy-nilly, into this novel. Paul D, Sethe, and a few other slaves belonging to the same owner in Kentucky experience a complete catalogue of barbaric practices and ungodly perversions from all over the South, as well as from Brazil and the West Indies. For instance, they are forced to wear a type of iron headgear used to keep starving slaves on vast Caribbean plantations from eating the sugarcane they were cutting. Neither Morrison nor her conscience-stricken admirers bother to ask whether such a device would really have existed on a small farm in tobacco-growing Kentucky.

The denouement occurs when, one fine day, after Sethe has been worn to a husk catering to Beloved, whose true identity she has long since guessed, she sees a white man about to enter her yard. It's only a kindly old abolitionist on his way to fetch Sethe's daughter for a part-time job, but Sethe flashes back two decades to the day when the slave-catchers came. She seizes an ice pick, and for a moment we think she is once again going to attack her own children. But wait—she doesn't lunge at her daughter or Beloved, she lunges at the white man! She doesn't hurt him, though, because this also happens to be the same fine day when the neighbors, who have shunned Sethe for the last twenty years, decide to show up in her front yard. They rush forward to stop her, and when the dust settles, everyone gapes in astonishment because, lo and behold, Beloved has vanished!

Michiko Kakutani, lamenting in *The New York Times* that the 1987 National Book Award was not given to *Beloved*, calls the novel "a magisterial and deeply moving

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meditation not only on the cruelties of a single institution, but on family, history and love." By "meditation" Miss Kakutani presumably means a series of ideas connected by logic. But what is the logic of this ending? Sethe's neighbors prevent a second murder, but it is not their action that exorcises the guilt-monster Beloved. Rather it is Sethe's decision, at long last, to attack the correct enemy. And that enemy is not slavery, as represented by slave-catchers, but the white race in general, as represented by an old man who happens to have spent his life opposing slavery. Critics made defensive by this novel's encyclopedia of horrors are so eager to find comfort in this portrait of a sympathetic white, they ignore the logic which discounts the man's goodness in favor of the symbolic evil of his whiteness. True, *Beloved* posits the Gordian knot of a greatly wronged woman who commits a great wrong. But rather than unravel the knot, it simply sunders it with the blade of reverse racism.

Now, what does all this have to do with magic realism? In the 1981 *New Republic* interview cited above, Morrison boasted of having created a black Macondo: "I write what I have recently begun to call village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe." This boast, with its cavalier inclusion of all black people into one "village," and its equally cavalier exclusion of all white readers from consideration, reflects Morrison's state of mind as she began *Beloved*. From bravely probing the consciences of even the most pitiable black characters, she had shifted to predictably blaming white racist oppression for every crime committed by the inhabitants of an enchanted village called blackness. The trouble is, there's an inherent contradiction between the theme of white racist oppression and the idea of blackness as an enchanted state.

García Márquez knew what he was doing when he hid Macondo deep in the Colombian interior. In terms of real time and space, Macondo seems to have been founded sometime in the nineteenth century by the adventurous Buendía family, descendants of sixteenth-century Spanish colonials who led a band of pioneers away from their safe coastal city over several impassable, cloud-covered mountain chains to the edge of an impenetrable swamp. In other words, Macondo is removed, by sheer force of will, from all those aspects of the modern world that literary people most love to hate. It represents pure romanticism, a flight into the wilderness by people who have experienced and rejected civilization. By dwelling there long enough—say, one hundred years—the inhabitants recapture the primal sense of wonder which used to animate the universe before science came along and reduced everything to a pile of unfriendly rubble.

Whatever the similarities between Macondo and Aracataca, García Márquez's actual birthplace, it is safe to say that neither resembles Lorain, Ohio, where Toni Morrison was born. In *The Bluest Eye,* Morrison makes fond use of the rich Southern folklore of Lorain's black migrants. But in those pre-García Márquez days, her fondness for folklore was balanced with humor and skepticism. When Cholly's aunt falls ill, her elderly friends' advice is "prolific, if contradictory." And when Pecola finally loses her sanity, it's because she visits a "conjure man" who pretends to grant her self-hating wish to have bright blue eyes. It's worth noting, in contrast with Morrison's later romanticization of magic, that this conjure man is both a phony and a pedophile.

Sula, Morrison's second (1973) novel about black life in Lorain, contains much of the precise language and striking metaphor of *The Bluest Eye*. But it also strains for the sonority of *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* only to end up sounding as if it, too, had been translated from the Spanish by Gregory Rabassa. Worse, it clouds the moral clarity of the first novel by clothing the bleaker aspects of ghetto life in the vivid garments of fantasy. Nowhere does this shift show up more clearly than in the contrast between Cholly and the "trifling" male character in *Sula,* a graceful panther named Ajax, who

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dreams of airplanes and releases butterflies—a shamelessly Márquezian touch—in the bedroom of the high-spirited Sula. At one point, while Sula and Ajax are making love, his face is described as having many layers: black on the surface, then gold leaf, then alabaster, then fertile loam. It almost seems stodgy, after admiring such a spellbinding love affair, to ask whether a guy with a gold-leaf face will stick around and support a family.

At this point we can detect a deeper drawback of magic realism for Morrison. By embracing the genre, Morrison also embraces its willful romanticism, which, in the context of black America, leads to the corollary that the most marginal people are the least corrupted by the false values of the dominant white society. From now on, she assumes that the lower a character's social status, the higher his mythic consciousness. The shame, anguish, and pity of characters like Pecola and Cholly can be supplanted by the descendants of Sula and Ajax, proud owners of luxury condos in Macondo.

Morrison's next novel, the prizewinning *Song of Solomon,* works even harder at enchantment. Milkman Dead, the spoiled son of a black-bourgeois family in Michigan, flees his stifling home for the headier company of his eccentric Aunt Pilate, a penniless but bewitching matriarch who runs a bootlegging operation on the wrong side of town. Milkman starts out seeking a bag of gold which he thinks Pilate is hoarding, but before long he is seeking his family's roots in Virginia, where he discovers such marvels as a conversation between hunters and hounds, and a legendary great-grandfather named Solomon who "lifted his beautiful black ass up in the sky and flew on home."

Unfortunately, this attempt by Morrison to transform black folklore into painless enchantment comes dangerously close to reviving the spirit of antebellum nostalgia, updated as a Disney cartoon full of yarn-spinning "darkies" with droll names. Thus Morrison is at pains to re-introduce the grim facts of oppression via an ominous character named Guitar, a boyhood friend of Milkman's who belongs to a secret society practicing random violence against whites. Guitar spends a lot of time berating Milkman about the brutality being inflicted on the civil-rights movement. He does this, apparently, not because his message has direct bearing on Milkman's quest, but because *Song of Solomon* needs social and political ballast to keep it from floating up and turning into *Song of the South.*

In the end, Milkman attempts flight. Pursued by Guitar to the cliff called Solomon's Leap, he commits an act of faith by leaping off. But whether he soars or drops, we never learn, because the novel ends right there. It's almost as if Morrison contrived this ending in order to deal with the conflict between harsh racial reality, as embodied in Guitar, and blackness as enchantment, as embodied in Milkman—only to suspend the contradiction at the last moment because it cannot be resolved.

Morrison is not the first black writer to seek the down-home sources of a distinctive black literary style; such efforts date back to the Harlem Renaissance. But she may be the first to combine black folk culture with the romantic impulses of magic realism, thereby producing an admixture which, among other things, distorts the essence of the down-home tradition. Her fourth novel, *Tar Baby,* (1981), takes as its central metaphor the old animal fable about Fox setting a trap for Rabbit in the form of a statue of tar. Rabbit gets mad at the statue and tries to beat it up, only to get all four paws and his head stuck. Fox carries Rabbit off, saying "I don't know what hardly to do with you." Rabbit begs him to do anything he wants, only "please don't throw me there in them briars." Any red-blooded American, black or white, will recall the ending. Fox throws Rabbit in the briars, and Rabbit kicks up his heels: "Oh ho, here's where I want to be, here's where I was bred and bo'n anyhow."

Contemporary folklorists argue that these tales had a political subtext, with Rabbit the sly trickster as the slave, and Fox the gullible predator as the master. Accepting this, one

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might expect *Tar Baby* to apply the tale to a black-white interaction, especially since it is the first of Morrison's novels to include white characters. Set on a Caribbean island, *Tar Baby* concerns the Streets, a retired white couple from Philadelphia; Sydney and Ondine, their black servants, also from Philadelphia; Jadine, the servants' niece, who is educated by the Streets as their own; and finally Son, a low-down black sailor who jumps ship, breaks into the Streets' mansion, and seduces the high-toned Jadine. Son, as the free-spirited Rabbit figure, becomes . . . well, stuck on Jadine, a tempting creature sent out by the white liberal Streets to capture Son and lure him away from his true black identity. The difference with the fable is that Fox wanted to eat Rabbit, while the Streets just want to integrate blacks into their white world. To Son, however, firmly rooted in black mythic consciousness (he comes from a small town in Florida), integration is the same as being devoured. So he escapes into the forest, "lickety-split" (the novel's final word).

Because this is also magic realism, the white folks serve the added function of playing corrupt modernity to the blacks' pure Macondo. You see, the island is full of nature-spirits and departed souls susurrating miraculous messages into any ear capable of hearing. But the capability to hear does not depend on how long people have lived there, how removed they are from scientific consciousness, or any other philosophical consideration of the type found in García Márquez. No, for Morrison, enchantment is color-coded. Jadine, the fashion model with the Ph.D., can hear the murmurings of "the swamp women," and Son, the world-weary drifter, can join the ghostly march of a centuries-old slave insurrection, for the self-evident reason that both are black. Old Mr. Street just sits in his greenhouse listening to Bach, subjugated nature and recorded music being all the enchantment the white race can handle. And there's no magic at all for Mrs. Street, a typical white bitch who spends her early married life sticking pins and scissors into her infant son. I say "the white race" and "typical" because every character in this book speaks less as a quirky individual than as a looming racial archetype. The wry humor of the old fable is lost in a pretentious jumble of animation and animosity.

There is a folktale at the heart of *Beloved,* too. Whether or not the animal fables implicitly refer to relations between masters and slaves, another cycle of tales does so explicitly. Called the "Old Marster and John" tales, they were neglected by paternalistic nineteenth-century folklorists such as Joel Chandler Harris, who preferred the apparent harmlessness of Rabbit and his cronies. *Beloved* contains a particularly good example of these tales, sharp-edged as they frequently are. It's about a slave caught stealing meat, who defends himself by saying that he can't be stealing, since he himself belongs to the master. By eating good meat, he is only using one item of the master's property to improve another.

In *Beloved,* surprisingly, this well-known tale is not identified as a tale. Rather, Morrison presents it as part of her own narration, a scene occurring between a cruel master and a slave called Sixo. The tale's humor gets blunted when Morrison adds that Sixo's master "beat him anyway to show him that the definitions belong to the definers—not the defined." And later, Sixo is burned to death for showing too much defiance. Obviously, Morrison is not interested in the tale's depiction of human give and take—the whole point being that the slave *does* define himself, as both cleverer and more righteous than the master. Clearly, human give and take has no place in Morrison's depiction of slavery as unrelieved genocide.

The main plot of *Beloved* can be seen as a variant on the same tale: a slave commits a crime, but it's not really a crime because it was committed by a slave. The system, and not the slave, stands unjustly condemned for a deed that would possess another meaning if committed in freedom. To some extent, a similar moral adjustment has to be made in judging the act of a woman in Sethe's position. But there has to be a quali-

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tative difference. Instead of being a sardonic comment on property rights and responsibilities, the story of Sethe is a life-and-death catastrophe, as unlike the tale as one's own child is unlike a piece of meat. Yet by excusing Sethe from lasting blame, Morrison almost equates her infanticide with Sixo's pilfering. In Morrison's mind there seems to be only one crime, that of slavery itself, and no person who lives under it has to answer for anything. So intent is she on showing the inhumanity of the master, she dehumanizes the slave. From the subtle calibration of right and wrong which distinguishes the "Old Marster and John" tales we arrive at the collapse of all moral distinctions.

What Morrison seems to forget is that black American folklore, however intensely rich it may be, is also intensely entangled with white folklore. Indeed, many of the "Old Marster and John" stories have European precedents, just as many white tales have African roots. But that doesn't degrade either. In the case of black folklore, one of its admirable functions was to preserve a sense of dignity and identity among people forced to live in intimate proximity with another people who considered themselves superior. By insisting that her black village be as radically removed from the white world as Macondo is from modernity, Morrison deprives black folklore of one of its most vital functions. She also indulges in the worst kind of romanticism, the kind that would reconstruct people in the name of setting them free.

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"Annonciade"
by Elizabeth Spires

But should the fiery essence of the soul think on
its high origin, and cast aside the numbing stain of
life: then will it carry with it, too, the flesh in
which it lodged and bear it also back among the stars.
—Prudentius, 4th century, A.D.

It is not right for me to look upon the dead,
And stain my eyesight with the mists of dying men.
—Euripides

Morning, and the sounds of the valley float
slowly, like smoke, up the tiered mountain
to our windows. A cock's crow, too early,
sets off a chain of barking dogs and donkeys,
the screams of a peacock, all reassuring
that the world below is awake and waits
to take us back when we are well enough to go.
Here at La Maison de Repos, each day
has the same beginning: alone, the eye opens,
sentient, to a room unchanged by any dream
or nightmare, relieved or disappointed
to be transported back to the waking dream.
An arm throws open a shutter, flooding
the doubtful mind with the brilliant
light of the Midi that changes white
shadowed sheets on the crumpled bed
into a still life of desire and absence.
Mountains and blue air and the sea,

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faraway waves soundlessly pounding the lit shore,
the horizon blurred, the azure coast,
wash upon wash, bleeding like a watercolor:
these things I see as I steady myself
at the window, still wanting to be alive.

Soon eye and body join in a rhythm
of small tasks a child could do
—though no child lives here—
a shaky hand dressing itself, carefully
buttoning buttons and putting on shoes,
before it joins the slow parade to breakfast.
I am among the fortunate who shuffle
and shift for themselves; others
are wheeled, or walk on crutches, or are led.
It is at breakfast that the curtained ambulance
sometimes slips away, delivering one
from our midst to health or oblivion.
A place at the table is empty, a face
gone forever, but nothing is said
to note the absence of the missing one.
Our silent circle contracts, or grows
larger to accommodate a new arrival
who pauses, uncertain, in the door,
unsure of what will happen next, waiting
to be politely questioned or ignored.

All morning we are touched by the shadow
of the Annonciade on the hill above,
the monastery bells ringing prime, calling
a scattered few to prayers and morning mass,
good nuns and brothers ascending,
in ones and twos, the 500 winding steps
of the Chemin de Rosaire, one old soul
all in black holding her rosary
as she climbs, counting the beads and steps
that take her, one by one, to heaven.
It would be good to be like her,
to simply *believe,* to question nothing,
her life an unwavering road she blindly
knows. Soon others follow, the fallen-away
and sightseers on holiday, grateful
after the long climb to enter the cool cavern

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of the church, crossing themselves
or genuflecting out of almost-forgotten habit,
lighting a votive candle for five francs.
Time's silence surrounds them, held
in the steady flame of the Sacred Heart,
in the armored effigy of a nameless crusader
who lies on a low altar in the crypt,
hands clasped in an attitude of prayer,
as if at any moment the warrior
soul will wake, leap up, and lead
the sleeping body to Apocalypse.
Most visitors cannot stay very long;
they speak in guilty whispers
and move through the church like intruders,
move quickly past the apocryphal
remains of martyrs, splintered fragments
of bone and strands of human hair
in shining jewel-encrusted caskets,
the stoppered crystal vials of blood
and tears, relics handed down for centuries
by the silent monks who lived here once,
who watched the crippled pilgrims come,
kneel down, and pray for a guardian spirit's
intercession, then sometimes rise
and throw away their crutches, favored
by a miracle. The old order's gone,
only a few lay caretakers left
to take care of the grounds and sell
postcards of the view to tourists.

It is *we,* the ill and ill-disposed,
who now live closest to annunciation,
who watch the darkness closing in
each end-of-the-world night,
who need the mountain air for health,
the silence for our shattered nerves,
the isolation to contain contagion.
We are our missing useless parts:
a chest coughs into a cup and cannot
stop itself; two bandaged eyes
wait for the touch of a surgeon
who anoints or takes away clear sight;
the body helplessly submits to the probe,

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to the omniscient X-ray eye that searches
for the small dark spot on the lung,
the glowing bone that will not mend.
Others wait for the pill, the injection,
the cup that will not pass,
wanting and yet not wanting to know
if dark malignancy remains,
if health, that faraway kingdom,
will be given back to them.
How can such suffering be chance?
Surely the spirit chooses its affliction
and makes it manifest, watching itself
fall and retreat from the world to atone,
as holy hermits did, for some secret
failing only its own heart knows.

It is easy by afternoon to become
delirious, to believe, as one lies
insubstantial in the shuttered room,
that the omnipresent flies travelling
mad circuits are sent from heaven
to reassure us that heaven, too, is imperfect.
We are close to heaven here, so high
above the world. Are we the chosen?
Chosen for what? Will our suffering
redeem others? Or only ourselves?
Surely in time we will each be blessed
with annunciation: I will rise
from this pallet of rest and recrimination
and step nakedly back into the world,
pulled down the mountain's winding road
to the lit auberge where the concierge
will calmly greet me, asking no questions,
knowing my journey was difficult.
He will bathe my forehead with a cool cloth,
wiping away pain and the memory
of pain, until my clouded mind
is a clean slate, my headache gone.
Then will I take my place among the guests
who drink the good wine and eat
the steaming food, who raise their glasses
in a toast to *health,* to *earth,*
to my return. Quietly will I sit there,

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like a ghost, as the last light
of the setting sun slips through me
before it, too, is lost behind the mountain.
The air will deepen into shades of blue
and darker blue, a cock will crow, betraying
its desire for dawn, and the bells
of the Annonciade will ring compline.
Then all will fall silent.
Once more I will briefly belong
to the world before I lay me down
on the white pillowcases of the Elect,
the lights of stars and houses coming on,
shining unrepentant, as if Earth
and Heaven had joined in a solitary moment
of love, the deceived and deceiving
eye, as it falls to sleep, feeling
strange intimations of happiness.

Menton, France

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Dance

Thanks for the memory: "Le Sacre" at the Joffrey

by Eva Resnikova

One's reaction to the Joffrey Ballet's reconstruction of Nijinsky's original 1913 choreography for *Le Sacre du printemps,* unveiled in New York during the company's fall season at City Center, depended to a great extent on one's expectations. Knowing that the production was being supervised by two Ph.D.s for a dance company not noted as a creative institution, I expected an academic exposition dutifully executed, which is pretty much what I got. And was thrilled to get.

Can any other score have suffered the indignities that have been heaped upon *Le Sacre* since its demise as a ballet nearly three-quarters of a century ago? Merely to list the names of some of those who have perpetrated their choreography upon it makes one recoil: Maurice Béjart, John Neumeier, Glen Tetley, Hans van Manen, Oscar Araiz, Pina Bausch, Valery Panov . . . .

Notable by his absence is the choreographer most closely associated with Stravinsky. In 1923 the teenaged George Balanchine had unsuccessfully sought permission from the authorities to stage *Le Sacre* at the Petrograd State Theater of Opera and Ballet. He never expressed interest in it again. In 1952 —with the composer's blessing—Nicolas Nabokov, representing the Congress for Cultural Freedom, tried to get Balanchine to create new choreography for *Le Sacre* for an arts festival in Paris entitled "Masterpieces of the Twentieth Century"—to no avail. In 1975 Robert Craft, reviewing Lincoln Kirstein's *Nijinsky Dancing,* ended with the exhortation: "Surely the City Ballet, which can hardly avoid *Le Sacre* during the approaching Stravinsky centenary, should recognize an obligation to present the Nijinsky version as preserved in Stravinsky's and Dame Marie Rambert's promptbook scores."[1] But Balanchine's company did, in fact, avoid *Le Sacre* during its 1982 Stravinsky Centennial Celebration.

Balanchine's lack of interest in either reviving Nijinsky's *Sacre* or choreographing Stravinsky's seminal score anew is hardly surprising. Like many choreographers, Balanchine often lost interest even in re-creating his own works after they had been absent from the repertory for some time. A more likely response for him was to create entirely new choreography to a score that still attracted him, as he did, for example, with Stravinsky's Violin Concerto, which began its balletic life as *Balustrade* in 1941 and became *Stravinsky Violin Concerto* in 1972, and Mozart's Divertimento, K. 287, which metamorphosed from *Caracole* in 1952 into *Divertimento No. 15* just four years later. Significant, too, is the nature of the title changes these ballets underwent, the originals hinting at extramusical meanings, the reworkings insisting upon the nonprogrammatic nature of these scores. In 1949, when

1 Reprinted in Vera Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Stravinsky in Pictures and Documents* (Simon & Schuster, 1978), pp. 509-14.

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Balanchine decided to restage *Firebird,* he chose neither to re-create the original Fokine version of 1910 nor even to create new choreography to the original ballet score, but rather to streamline the story by choreographing one of the several suites that Stravinsky had extracted for concert performance.

That Balanchine chose to apply neither of these approaches to *Le Sacre* shows his understanding of the irreducibly programmatic nature of the score, making it impossible for him either to treat the music as an abstraction or to alter the original scenario.[2] Before a note was written, Stravinsky and Nicholas Roerich, the designer, came up with a working libretto, and when Stravinsky composed, he saw pictures of the action in his mind. For example, in a letter to Roerich of September 26, 1911, the composer wrote of the old woman in the Auguries of Spring: "I see her running in front of the group, sometimes stopping it and interrupting the rhythmic flow."[3] Much of the pleasure of watching the Joffrey reconstruction lay in finally seeing action that was clearly linked to the music in a way that made sense. The Joffrey staging should therefore serve as a corrective against years of damage inflicted by musically insensitive choreographers—and, one would hope, insure against future mayhem.

It should also serve to discredit a revisionist view of the score disseminated by the composer himself, namely, that *Le Sacre du printemps* was really best considered in concert. As Craft points out in his Kirstein review, Stravinsky's self-contradictory statements over the years concerning both Nijinsky's musical competence and his choreographic talent stem largely from the composer's disgust at the rioting that attended the premiere of the ballet, especially when compared with the concert premiere a year later, also conducted by Pierre Monteux. One assumes that Craft chose his words with care when he wrote that, following the concert, "Stravinsky was acclaimed by the audience as no other living composer had ever been in the history of music." He adds, "The scandal of the first performance, the year before, was forgotten in the triumph."[4] As was, apparently, the libretto and the choreography that had helped to guide these "Pictures of Pagan Russia," as the score is subtitled.

A more questionable revisionist view of *Le Sacre* was introduced by Millicent Hodson, the dance historian who collected and collated the materials upon which the Joffrey production was based, and set it on the dancers. During her researches she called upon the art historian and Roerich specialist Kenneth Archer. Hodson is now Mrs. Archer, and one wonders if she has allowed her head to be swayed by her heart on the question of Roerich's contribution to the ballet, which she and Archer consider to extend far beyond that which has been accorded him in the past. (At a meeting of the Dance Critics Association in early November devoted to *Le Sacre,* the soft-spoken Craft and the terribly British Archer had a tensely polite stand-off on the question of who was the more intimidating personage, Stravinsky or Roerich.) In addition to being a painter, Roerich was an archaeologist with a special interest in ancient Slavic culture, and it is Hodson's thesis that he had a direct effect on the actual choreography of *Le Sacre* by introducing Nijinsky to artifacts of this

2 The only choreographer who can be said in a way to have gotten away with the latter is Paul Taylor in his *Le Sacre du printemps (The Rehearsal),* and he did it by mining for its comedy the four-hand piano version. Interestingly, in a footnote to his discussion of *Le Sacre* in *Nijinsky Dancing,* Kirstein reports that, following the New York City Ballet's Stravinsky Festival of 1972, Balanchine "felt he might one day arrange the piece, not to the full orchestral score, but rather to Stravinsky's own reduction for two pianos." (Sic; Stravinsky's score was not a two-piano arrangement but a four-hand reduction made for rehearsal purposes.)

3 Stravinsky and Craft, p. 83.

4 *Stravinsky: Selected Correspondence, Volume II,* edited and with commentaries by Robert Craft (Knopf, 1984), p. 59 fn.

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era, including carved wooden idols, which, she claims, "helped to shape the strangely introverted movements of the dance."[5] Other visual sources provided by Roerich, she feels, "probably influenc[ed] the shapes of groups and ground patterns."

Whatever *Le Sacre* might be, however, it is not an exercise in ethnography. There is, for example, the not-so-small matter of the authenticity of the rite itself. Hodson admits that "there is no clear precedent in Slavic mythology for the sacrifice of the maiden," which seems rather to have been lifted from the Aztecs. "Given Roerich's commitment to archaeological authenticity and the encouragement he gave both Stravinsky and Nijinsky to use their Slavic heritage," she writes, "it is curious that he rewrote mythology for the climax of *Sacre*." (At the dance critics conference she attributed Roerich's lapse to poetic license.) Hodson also points out the validity, based on the carved figures, of Leonide Massine's defense of his use of parallel rather than turned-in feet in his 1920 restaging; for Hodson this "only serves to underscore Nijinsky's originality in pushing the postures . . . beyond the limits of his visual sources."

Owing to the survival of a handful of backstage photographs, the elements most familiar to us from the original production are some of the costumes—though the riot of color they present is a shock, so used are we to seeing them in monochrome—and this distinctive *Sacre* posture. The lolling head, sagging knees, turned-in toes, arms held bent and close to the body, and lightly clenched fists helped to determine the range of movement, which was necessarily constricted. The choreographic interest lay less in the gestures themselves than in their point and counterpoint to the complex rhythms and constantly changing meters of the music. The ballet climaxes in the Chosen Maiden's frenzied four-and-a-half-minute solo of self-immolation, her awkward jumps representing an effort to join the sun god in a mystic marriage.

There is no way definitively to judge the accuracy of Hodson's reconstruction of the steps and gestures and their rhythmic relationship to the music. But surely we have seen enough dance productions staged from notation, which indicates precisely these things, to know that what emerges can be "accurate" and yet without theatrical life. A case in point is American Ballet Theatre's 1983 production, staged from Labanotation, of the Balanchine-Mozart *Symphonie Concertante*—a ballet that had last been danced in 1952 and dealt in a style and an aesthetic still very much alive, just across Lincoln Center plaza, at the time of the revival. How much more difficult, then, to attempt a reproduction of a work that did not arise out of any existing tradition, enjoyed no active repertory life, and had no direct progeny.

From a purely technical point of view, the Joffrey corps de ballet is no doubt at least the equal of its Ballets Russes counterpart, and *Le Sacre* does not call for the skill in pantomime that accounts for the failure of modern-day attempts to recapture the spirit of such works as *Three-Cornered Hat* and *Boutique fantasque*. Any professional ballet dancer today has had more experience dealing with complex musical counts and non-balletic poses and movements than the Imperial Russians did, and the Joffrey dancers were better rehearsed and had a far friendlier attitude toward the work than the original executants, most of whom were actively hostile to Nijinsky, his choreography, and the music. Perhaps some of the wildness attributed to the 1913 production was really sloppiness, especially at the premiere, when the audience's vocal reactions, pro and con, often prevented the dancers from hearing the music.

That the Joffrey production failed to generate the emotional impact that seemed to be promised by the accounts of contemporary witnesses is not necessarily an indict-

5 Hodson's quotations are from her article "Nijinsky's Choreographic Method: Visual Sources from Roerich for *Le Sacre du printemps*," *Dance Research Journal*, Winter 1986-87, pp. 7-15.

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ment either of Hodson or of the dancers. In some quarters the Joffrey dancers were criticized for a lack of "weight" in their movement, as if Nijinsky had been working not with members of the Imperial Russian Ballet but with *echt* modern dancers who had never touched a ballet barre or donned a toe shoe in their lives—creatures who, of course, did not exist in 1913, and would not have been allowed anywhere near Diaghilev's Ballets Russes if they had. One reviewer actually wrote that the Joffrey dancers' classical training got in the way of the performance, and wished that she could have seen it danced by members of Paul Taylor's or Martha Graham's troupe. Where this fallacious concept of weighted movement in Nijinsky's *Sacre* originated remains a mystery. It is true that the dancers often stamp out the music's rhythms with their feet; but so do the Coachmen in *Petrushka,* and no one ever accused Fokine of being the father of modern dance.

The most serious detriment to the emotional impact of the Joffrey staging, however, lay not in the dancing but in the music. In his memoirs, Massine writes that Diaghilev blamed the failure of Nijinsky's version on his attempting "to do too much at once." "He had not realized," Diaghilev said, "that the eye and ear cannot absorb simultaneously as much as the ear alone."[6] The state of innocence in which the audience of 1913 heard Stravinsky's score for the first time can never be recaptured, just as we cannot erase from our consciousness the entire history of modern and postmodern dance. Nonetheless, any attempt to conjure the effect of the original *Sacre* cannot succeed if the music is not accurately reproduced. It is therefore incomprehensible that the Joffrey resorted to Robert Rudolf's reorchestration (which, according to Craft, "would have horrified Stravinsky"[7]), which has unfortunately been able to gain a foothold in this country because of the *Sacre*'s lack of copyright here.

Why dance-goers and critics tolerate it is another matter. For those whose experience of the music extends only to the compressed dynamics of recordings, this bastardization might not seem such an affront. The composer himself, discussing several recordings of this score, pointed out that "while the mediumizing of sound levels does only negligible damage to some music, it deprives *The Rite* of one of its dimensions; which is partly why a live performance is a shock even now to anyone who has learned the work from recordings."[8] This "shock" was precisely what was missing from the wan sounds that emanated from the City Center pit.

That the Joffrey is unable to engage a conductor of the stature of Monteux is understandable. But until it restores the music as Stravinsky wrote it, and as it was performed in Paris and London in 1913, this *Sacre,* for all its merits, can be neither accurately judged nor taken completely seriously.

6 Leonide Massine, *My Life in Ballet* (Macmillan, 1968), p. 152.

7 Stravinsky and Craft, p. 660.

8 Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Retrospectives and Conclusions* (Knopf, 1969), p. 129.

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Art

Stuart Davis in his own time

by Karen Wilkin

Stuart Davis has a sure claim to a place in the history of American art. As early as 1932, he was hailed as "the ace of American modernists" and there is scarcely a museum in the United States that doesn't boast of at least one of his works. Ask for a description of a typical Davis and you are likely to hear about syncopated, brilliantly colored, hard-edged planes, something like the Museum of Modern Art's *Visa* (the one with "champion" in large letters) or the Whitney's *Owh! In San Pao* (the one with the taxi-yellow background that frequently hangs in the stairwell). They are typical Davises, all right, but they are late paintings and characteristic of only a small part of a career spanning half a century. Surprisingly, given Davis's fame, most of his long, complex evolution as an artist remains unfamiliar.

Davis first exhibited in 1910. He was seventeen, Robert Henri's star pupil, and already adept at the scenes of urban low-life that had won Henri and his intimate circle—a group that included John Sloan, George Luks, and Everett Shinn—the nickname "Ashcan School." Three years later, Davis had five watercolors accepted for the American section of the great, artist-organized "International Exhibition of Modern Art"—the 1913 Armory Show. He later recalled that the daring European art in the exhibition, which included works by Cézanne, Van Gogh, Matisse, Picasso, and many others, polarized New York artists. He himself was unequivocally enthusiastic, profoundly excited by his first direct encounter with advanced painting. He claimed to have become at once dissatisfied with his naturalistic manner and to have resolved at once to be "a Modern artist." At least, that's how he liked to tell it.

Whether or not the Armory Show was the revelation that Davis insisted it was, he was a rapid convert and a faithful adherent to the cause of modernism. He spent the next decade assimilating the language of the European innovators and the rest of his life translating that language into an unmistakably American idiom. Through it all, he remained loyal to the vernacular themes that he had first explored as Henri's student, basing even the most abstract of his pictures on shop fronts, dockyards, street signs, gas stations, dime-store gadgets. It took him almost forty years to get from the lurid dance hall scenes of his Armory Show watercolors to the slangy economy of *Visa,* but in the end, he invented a personal, home-grown brand of Cubism.

If Davis's development is less well known than might be expected, it is partly because of when he worked. He slips between the two "heroic" generations of American art. Born in 1892, he was much younger than the pioneer (and often expatriate) American modernists, artists like John Marin, Alfred Maurer, and Marsden Hartley, yet like them, Davis made advanced European painting the basis of his art. His real contemporaries were, for the most part, Social Realists

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or sentimental American Scene painters and they were largely less adventurous and simply not as good as he was. For a younger generation, the Abstract Expressionists, Davis was friend and mentor, living proof that it was possible to be an American, live in New York, and make serious, ambitious art. His uncompromising modernism set a standard for these younger artists in the 1930s, yet he never had the authority that the best Europeans did, and by the 1940s he had grave aesthetic differences with his former friends; at the same time, he found himself overshadowed by them. Davis doesn't fit in comfortably, so it is hard to take stock of him.

Nor has there been much opportunity to evaluate Davis's work as a coherent whole. His last retrospective was circulated in 1965, shortly after his death the previous year. A 1978 exhibit dealing with his forays into color theory has been the most comprehensive since then. In the past few years, interest in early American modernism has increased, so it has been somewhat easier to form an opinion of Davis's achievement, but even the most assiduous gallery-goers have been able to see his work only in small increments. There have been modest shows of his early figurative pictures, of transitional paintings of the years just after the Armory Show, of early drawings, mid-career images of New York, and late, black-and-white versions of well-known works. The Whitney Museum has been hanging its Davises, a collection ranging from a seminal, geometric still life of 1928 to jazzy abstractions of the 1950s, while the dismal inaugural installation at the Metropolitan Museum's new twentieth-century galleries was relieved by two of Davis's marvelous, crisp still lifes of the 1920s and a spectacular peach-toned mural, produced as a W.P.A. project for a broadcasting studio at WNYC. It has been possible to see Davises, but you had to work at it.

Happily, the Metropolitan is planning a full-scale retrospective, and this fall two exemplary, tightly focused exhibitions concentrated on crucial periods in Davis's career: "Stuart Davis: The Breakthrough Years 1922-24," at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, with a catalogue essay by William C. Agee, the director of the Davis catalogue raisonné project; and "Stuart Davis: An American in Paris," a selection of works from Davis's European sojourn in 1928 and '29, organized by Lewis Kachur, a specialist in the period, for the Whitney Museum at Philip Morris.[1]

The paintings in "An American in Paris" seemed more familiar, more characteristic of Davis (which is not to say that the show held no surprises) so it was "The Breakthrough Years" that proved more illuminating. William Agee contends that the pictures of 1922 to 1924 signal the beginning of Davis's maturity. By 1922, he had thoroughly digested Cubist ideas. He was no longer, as he had done a few years earlier, imitating the look of Cubist paintings by finding ready-made, intersecting planes in rows of tombstones or buildings on a hillside. Nor was he painting elegant but respectful landscapes in the manner of Picasso or Braque, as he had the year before. By 1922, Davis was ready to challenge his chosen ancestors more directly, in a series of large, ambitious, table-top still lifes, including one, *Still Life with "The Dial,"* which enshrines an image of Scofield Thayer's influential magazine, an important source of information about the avant-garde, to which Davis occasionally contributed drawings. They are arresting pictures, not only because of their size and frontality but because of their audacity and conviction. Davis was not yet thirty, but he was meeting the artists he admired most on their own terms and on their own ground—the tipped up top of the Cubist *guéridon.*

The aggressiveness of these paintings of 1922 is not unique within Davis's art. Quite the opposite. His best pictures are often

1 "Stuart Davis: The Breakthrough Years 1922-24" was on view at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries from November 7 through December 26. "Stuart Davis: An American in Paris" was on display at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris from October 18 through December 10.

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pugnacious, confrontational. What is extraordinary about the table-top still lifes is their appearance of spontaneity. Davis had painted loosely before, in his suggestive, "impressionist" Ashcan School style, but almost as soon as he embraced modernism he rejected brushiness and painterliness for clearly bounded, densely painted planes. He usually strove to make his pictures look immutable, banning all suggestions of hesitation, doubt, or change from his finished canvases. As a mature painter, he worked with agonizing slowness, tinkering with each composition, exploring its permutations in drawings and color studies, and finally stroking on careful layers of paint, depositing unmodulated hues onto predetermined planes. (Something like this practice dates from at least 1927, to judge by the traced and squared-off drawings that have survived.) Yet the table-top still lifes are notable for their fluid, sensuous touch and their improvised quality. In marked contrast to the stamped-out, inevitable character of even the most eccentric shape or squiggle in Davis's mature works, pictures like *Still Life with "The Dial"* or the pale, stippled *Three Table Still Life* seem to happen as you look.

Their palette, too, is different from the full-throttle primaries and super-heated pinks, greens, and oranges of Davis's more familiar works. In their stead are delicate greys, unnameable, fragile mauves, tans, and dull reds, sparked with clear blues and pinks. It's an original palette, not obviously indebted to French Cubism (pace Juan Gris), but it is a range of colors that Davis inexplicably abandoned within a few years, in the same way that he jettisoned the brushy, gestural paint application of the table-top still lifes. As a group, these intuitive, delicate pictures with their seductive surfaces suggest that Davis might have become a very different kind of painter than the one we know had he pursued the implications of his canvases of 1922.

Ultimately, it is the looseness and the directness of the table-top still lifes that is most striking, in the context of Davis's avowed belief in the necessity of firm composition and the dominance of drawn construction. He wrote at length in his notebooks about the paramount role of drawing in all painting, astonishingly—for an artist whose work seems completely dependent upon complex color relationships—disavowing the importance of color and maintaining that it was simply a way of emphasizing the structure of planes established by good drawing. A good drawing, for Davis, was a codification of the artist's feelings and perceptions at the time of its making, a distillation of direct experience into what he came to call "color-space logic." A good drawing or, as he called it, a "configuration," would not be exhausted by a single painting. It could serve as the armature, the skeleton for many more.

Davis must have thought highly of the configurations of a number of his works of "the breakthrough years," particularly a group of small gouaches of 1922. They are playful, spotted and dotted pictures, with a cool, restrained palette and often with floating words that simultaneously recall orthodox Cubist practice and the randomness of the world outside Davis's studio. One small picture stresses the imperatives of road signs: "curve" and "go slow." William Agee stresses the importance of these otherwise modest pictures, since Davis returned to them repeatedly, using their configurations as the bases for major paintings done many years later. He even painted additions directly on one tiny, charming picture. Davis turned with increasing frequency to his own earlier work as a point of departure, treating these configurations as he once had observed reality. He developed a thrifty habit of recycling images that pleased him, reworking them according to his preoccupations of the moment, so that each new rendition was a kind of criticism of the previous version. To make a jazz analogy, which is always tempting, given Davis's declared passion for hot music and cool slang, he was like a hip musician with a repertory of recognizable tunes played each time with new harmonies and dynamics.

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The gouaches of 1922 are the first images which Davis replayed, so Agee is plainly right in according them special significance. I'm less convinced by his evaluation of Davis's paintings of 1921, both the handsome, if less ambitious, Cubist landscapes and the relatively well-known "tobacco" still lifes of the same year. The latter series incorporates images of cigarette packages, rolling paper labels, and the like, all carefully painted to resemble pasted papers. The tobacco still lifes are jammed and congested in a way that is admittedly criticized by the spatially complex, accomplished table-top still lifes of the following year. The later pictures are, in absolute terms, better, but the theme of the tobacco still lifes, their use of lettering and labels, their scale, and, above all, their pared-down, non-referential structure, make them milestones in Davis's career. It is possible to make a case for Davis's breakthrough years beginning in 1921.

Whatever the critical date may be, Agee's exhibition made it clear that consistency was never Davis's hallmark. In his pictures of 1923, he seemed to abandon his direction of the previous year and withdraw to a greater degree of naturalism. He would do something similar many times in his painting life, often when he travelled, as though he was so fascinated by the particulars of each new place that he refused to take liberties with what he saw. In fact, most of the exhibition's paintings of 1923 were made during a stay in Santa Fe, New Mexico, when Davis and his younger brother, Wyatt, drove across the country with John Sloan and his wife, Dolly. Davis expected to like New Mexico on the strength of the Sloans' enthusiasm. They had sent him to Gloucester, Massachusetts years before and he had fallen in love with the place, returning almost every summer. But Santa Fe disappointed him. He described the light and landscape as "ready-made" for painting, yet he disliked it and complained of doing little work. He managed to produce a few creditable landscapes, but a group of truly awful figure paintings is evidence that he wasn't altogether happy. It's not just that his big-eyed Mexicans verge on kitsch; he seemed to forget everything he knew about Cubist structure. The banal figures are crisscrossed by meaningless grid lines and broken into a patchwork of pleasing but no less arbitrary color. The result is a desperate grasping at manner and it is difficult to believe that they were painted by the man capable of the thoughtful counterpoint of the table-top still lifes. To be fair, Davis rarely painted the figure once he gave up his Ashcan School manner (except for some fine portraits of the late Teens). His few "color-space" figures suggest that he lacked the courage to attack faces and bodies the way he did still-life objects and urban landscapes. His New Mexican figures prove how right he was to avoid the subject.

If Davis's figure paintings from Santa Fe were, mercifully, a dead end, a more curious series begun during his stay proved seminal. They are deadpan, near-monochrome "portraits" of kitchen utensils and tools. Davis may have chosen these everyday objects for their lack of art-historical associations, as a declaration of modernism, or they may have been a reaction against the obvious beauties of the landscape. But he wrote about the omnipresent "great dead population" of the region, declaring that Santa Fe was a place for an archaeologist rather than for a painter. Was he making ironic records of the artifacts of his own civilization?

The oversized saw, eggbeater, and the dangling lightbulb are unexpectedly potent images. And they are significant for more than appearance, since Davis continued to use Woolworth's still-life motifs after his return to New York. A series from 1924, once again richly and subtly colored and meticulously painted, juxtaposes giant lightbulbs, vases, and the like with a spareness that anticipates some of Davis's best pictures of thirty years later and a supercharged realism that has been seen to prefigure Pop art. Davis pursued these themes in the following years, eventually constructing some of his most daring abstractions, in 1927 and '28, from images of "an electric fan, a rubber glove and an egg-beater" nailed to a table.

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The Eggbeaters were among the most radical pictures painted in the United States at the time and established Davis's reputation as a young artist to be reckoned with, at least in enlightened circles. His exhibition of eggbeaters and kitchen utensil still lifes, in 1928, had an unprecedented result for his career. Juliana Force, the director of the Whitney Studio Club, the forerunner of the Whitney Museum, purchased a group of Davis's works for Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. It was his first substantial sale and it allowed him to leave almost immediately for Paris.

He stayed almost a year and a half, never venturing far from the city, sketching in the streets, painting, and making prints. After his return to New York, Davis's Paris years gave him a status rather like that of a Moslem back from Mecca, among his American colleagues unable to travel because of the Depression. The immediate effect of Paris of the late 1920s on a thirty-five-year-old, visually sophisticated American painter was the subject of Lewis Kachur's exhibition "An American in Paris." It brought together a good selection of the paintings that Davis produced in his borrowed Montparnasse studio, and an adequate sampling of drawings and prints. Unfortunately, several key works were missing, including two of the best pictures of the period, the Hirshhorn Museum's *Rue des Rats No. 2* and the Lane Collection's *Adit,* along with *Rue Lipp,* a picture crucial to Kachur's thesis, optimistically listed in the catalogue but apparently snarled in the intricacies of Andrew Crispo's legal predicament.

A first impression of the Paris pictures is one of rather conventional postcard views enlivened by brilliant color. Clearly Davis, like many Americans abroad for the first time, was enthralled by the place. As his drawings attest, its otherness fascinated him; he sketched everything that struck him as "typically Parisian": siphon bottles, mansard roofs, café *terrasses,* a Turkish toilet. He had resisted Santa Fe's natural beauties, but as a connoisseur of urban life Davis made no effort to resist Paris. He later said that he found "the actuality so interesting" that he wanted "to paint it just as it was," and that, at first glance, seems exactly what he has done, retreating completely from the formal audacity of his last New York pictures and carefully recording telling details. Yet Davis's Paris is oddly unpopulated. In his Ashcan School days, Davis had painted the life of the city in Henri and Sloan's terms; his Hoboken alleys were full of working girls and cats, his New York streets were backgrounds for saloon patrons and their lady friends. But his Paris squares are empty of figures—except for the occasional statue—and his cafés are devoid of patrons. The city is reduced to an arrangement of flat, colored planes, albeit planes whose shapes correspond quite closely to those of the buildings that inspired them.

Davis consistently respected the look of the places he chose to paint in Paris, and adhered to a more or less conventional, if schematic, version of perspective; details of architecture and street furniture, wrought iron and signs, awnings and shutters, like the motifs lovingly entered in his sketchbooks, provide an impression of fidelity to appearance. Longer acquaintance with the pictures makes it plain that Davis tried to subvert this inherent naturalism. The illusionistic street scenes support larger-scale "abstract" configurations established by blocks of extraordinarily beautiful and inventive color, dramatically varied paint surfaces, and repetitive drawn patterns. The absence of figures helps to focus attention on these essentially formal relationships. In the best of the Paris pictures, color takes over, snapping Davis's souvenir-postcard and travel-poster images into a realm of subtle, two-dimensional abstraction that is not wholly different from that of the Cubist still lifes he had painted in New York before his departure. Kachur maintains that Davis had not, in fact, altered his approach appreciably but was deliberately tackling subject matter not yet used by the French Cubists; he was simply substituting the urban streetscape for still life or traditional landscape.

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Yet the Paris pictures have little of the spatial coherence of Cubist paintings. Instead of reading as arrangements of fluctuating planes, all related to a single surface plane, as Cubist pictures do, Davis's streetscapes often seem to exist in terms of two not quite integrated spatial conceptions: the relatively traditional urban landscape and the superimposed abstract layer of arresting color, texture, and pattern, all bound uneasily together by a sharply defined painted border. The abstract superstructure appears to be a brilliant, flat—if interrupted—surface independent of the relatively illusionistic space of the street scene, so the whole remains unstable and often unsettling. The exhibition included two reprisals of Paris themes, the Whitney's snappy red, white, blue, and black *The Paris Bit,* and a study for the picture, both variants on the absent *Rue Lipp.* They were, in some ways, criticisms of even the best of the Paris pictures, demonstrating how the mature Davis was able to achieve great complexity without sacrificing unity.

Davis always acknowledged his debt to French painting and said that the best American art, including his own, was built upon the innovations of French artists, but in his autobiography, written in 1945, and in his later discussions of his Paris stay, he failed to mention any contact with French art or artists. He stressed that he spoke no French and implied that he had remained more or less isolated from the art community. Perhaps he meant to suggest that he had stayed uninfluenced, even while in close proximity to the artists who had taught him so much. Perhaps it was a canny defense against reactionary critics who were quick to label any artist who admired European modernism as "un-American"; despite his open admiration for French art, Davis was angry when one reviewer claimed that his value to American art was lessened because his style was "too French." Yet it seems evident from Davis's Paris pictures that he was more informed about the art scene around him than he later cared to admit, and it would have been remarkable if he had not been. His friendship with Elliot Paul, an established member of the expatriate community and a cofounder of the experimental magazine *transition,* provided Davis with instant access to what Paul called "Paris in its best American years." Paul was an intimate of Gertrude Stein's who knew Picasso and most of the leading artists in Paris. Davis's unpublished letters to his family in New York prove that he took full advantage of the connection. The exhibition and its catalogue include one in particular, a letter to his father describing a visit to Gertrude Stein's collection and a promised introduction to Picasso. Davis visited Léger's studio as well, as the letter records, and showed the French master his own recent work, plus two New York pictures, when the visit was returned. (Léger preferred the Eggbeaters to the streetscapes.) The implications of the Paris pictures are amply borne out by these newly published texts.

Stuart Davis has often been discussed as both a precursor of the Pop movement and an ancestor of the color abstraction of the 1960s. His art has been seen, too, as a bridge between the first beachhead of American modernism and the postwar New York School. Yet to see him merely as a link, a transitional figure in the history of recent American art, is to distort Davis's significance and to underestimate his originality and complexity. Exhibitions like "The Breakthrough Years" and "An American in Paris" help Davis to come more clearly into focus on his own and in the context of his own time, rather than in relation to earlier and later artists. He is a trickier painter, a more erratic, and a more provocative one than most museum collections suggest. We may risk confusing that clear image we have of *Visa* or *Owh! In San Pao,* but if Davis's art is hard to categorize, it should make us admire his independence of mind all the more. Despite the feints, the sidesteps, and the eccentricities of his long life as an artist, the excellence of his best pictures speaks for itself. He is probably the best American painter of his generation.

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Nadelman's world

by Eric Gibson

These days, admirers of Elie Nadelman's elegant, exquisite sculpture have little opportunity to view his work, barely half a dozen pieces being visible in New York. Of those, one, a relief above the Fuller Building on East Fifty-seventh Street, is hard to see, and two others, in the lobby of the New York State Theater in Lincoln Center, are vapid, gargantuan enlargements of lesser works. Only at the Museum of Modern Art can one see Nadelman properly. There he is represented by two of his most accomplished pieces, *Man in the Open Air* and *Woman at the Piano,* both from the Teens. Other than these, Nadelman's work is today all but forgotten. It is a sad slide into obscurity for an artist who was once at the center of the vanguard milieu on both sides of the Atlantic—but it may have been inevitable. Our view of the world has changed too much to accommodate the stylized, mannered figures and the vanished social world that Nadelman, who lived from 1882 to 1946, evoked in his sculpture.

There was good reason, then, to welcome the exhibition of Nadelman's work at the Sidney Janis Gallery in October. One could not help feeling it was the last retrospective of the artist we shall see for a very long time. Comprehensive in the way one has come to take for granted with Janis loan exhibitions, the show was a succinct recapitulation of the Whitney's 1975 survey of Nadelman's work and included sculpture and drawings from all phases of the artist's career.

The critic Henry McBride once observed that Nadelman's work "points two ways at once, backward and forward." He was referring to Nadelman's varied, simultaneous influences, which ranged from classical antiquity to Seurat, from Neo-classicism to Brancusi. McBride was right. One of the many revelations—shocks, almost—one receives upon seeing Nadelman's work is its high degree of eclecticism. Saccharine-sweet academic classicism stands beside some very ambitious handling of the human figure. More surprising still is one's discovery that Nadelman's tradition-oriented work came *after* his modernist phase.

But McBride's observation does not apply to Nadelman's influences alone. It represents an accurate summary of the artist's historical position. For although a contemporary of Gaston Lachaise, William Zorach, and Max Weber—exhibiting with them at Alfred Stieglitz's "291" Gallery and other outposts of the avant-garde in New York—Nadelman appears to us now as an artist who marks the end of an era. He often looks to be the last representative of the genteel tradition, a tradition of taste and refinement in society, of delicate sentiment and a fidelity to nature in art. The convulsions of the modern era are screened out of Nadelman's art. Lachaise's frank sexuality and Weber's dissolution of the object in a Cubist approach to form were alien to Nadelman's sensibility. He answers them with a work like *Tango* of 1919, a sculpture of two people in period

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dress and coiffure dancing together. (It is one of a group of posthumous, estate-authorized bronze casts of wood sculptures that are included in the Janis exhibition.) Nadelman's distance from Lachaise is also evident in a certain superficial similarity in the work of the two artists. Their figures have a pneumatic look, an unnatural fullness to them, but Lachaise's swell with sensuality while Nadelman's are weightless, disembodied. Nadelman's response to the psychological stresses of modern life was to remove his figures into a kind of dream world, a refuge where the old values of charm, elegance, and good manners prevailed.

Nadelman was too rooted in the classical ideal of wholeness and order to embrace with any confidence the cultural ethos of modernism. It is this strain of conformity which persists throughout his varied work, explaining its startling eclecticism and its shifts from innovation to a more conservative use of tradition. His interest lay not in overturning the old order but in updating and refining it. To this end Nadelman evolved a style which enabled him to look "two ways at once," one which permitted him to accommodate the new aesthetic imperatives while keeping faith with what had gone before. Thus, for the first half of his career, he hewed to the subject of the ideal nude, re-ordering it with clear contours, simplified volumes, and balanced internal rhythms. A balanced set of formal relationships—what Nadelman in *Camera Work* called his "harmony"—took the place of classical proportions. To be sure, this new style veered from his most precious sculpture, such as the *Horse* of 1914, to the Baroque figure style of the 1908 *Male Nude.* But in this way Nadelman affirmed his allegiance to naturalism, even as he introduced a sufficient measure of anti-naturalism or abstraction to be able to partake in the artistic vanguard of the day.

Yet what is interesting about Nadelman's modernism is the extent to which he operated parallel to the sculptural innovations of his day. During the first decade of the century, while he was living in Paris, Nadelman experimented in a quasi-Cubist manner which, when seen by Picasso and others, caused quite a stir in avant-garde circles. In fact, Nadelman's "Cubism" was closer to the style later adopted by Umberto Boccioni in his *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space,* only less radical. Consisting largely of limited surface deformation, it neither altered the basic features of the face nor invaded the structure of the head. Nor could it have. Nadelman was too wedded to the pictorialism of Neo-classical sculpture to have produced anything as aggressively plastic as a Cubist style. Throughout his life he was more at home with an aesthetic idea in which smooth surfaces, clear silhouettes, and a limited number of viewpoints encouraged in the viewer a detached scrutiny of each sculpture.

Similarly, after coming under the influence of Brancusi and Modigliani in the early Teens in Paris, Nadelman was careful to stop short of the kind of formal simplification that conveyed a suggestion of the sculpture as pure object. Nadelman's works do assert an "objectness" of a sort, but it is as decorative objects that they exist, objects withdrawn from any kind of daily commerce, for which they appear to be too precious, too delicate and refined. If Brancusi, in the lore of modernism, is the inspired artisan, then Nadelman, with his sophistication and detachment, must be seen as the dandy. Even when he took up wood carving shortly after his emigration to America in 1914, he eschewed the prevailing aesthetic trends of the day and made no attempt in his handling of his material to suggest its origins in nature. Nor did his work show evidence of any contact with the primitive art that was a major influence on just about every contemporary artist. Indeed, Nadelman polychromed his finished sculptures and even had assistants reproduce them in multiples, a complete heresy at a time when direct carving—the sign of individual touch and the direct involvement of the artist—carried moral as well as aesthetic weight.

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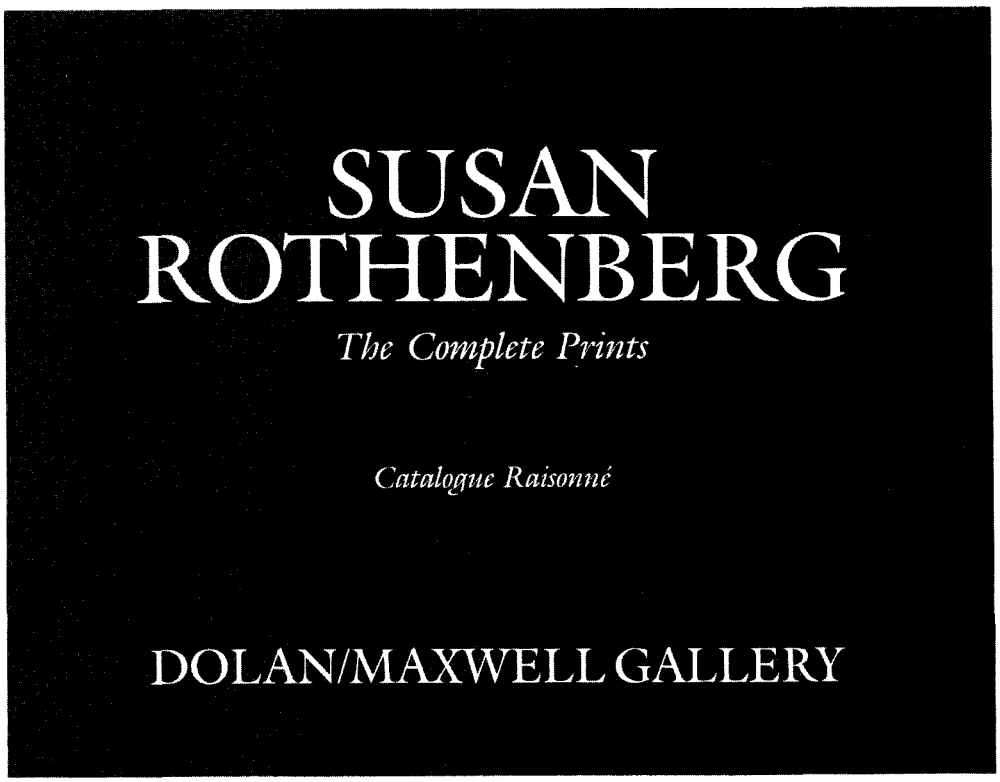
In his ongoing dialogue with past and present, Nadelman's work was greatly enhanced by his discovery of American folk art shortly after his arrival in this country. Whereas Americans, looking toward Europe for artistic models, had regarded folk art as being of solely documentary value, Nadelman, as an outsider, brought to it an unprejudiced perspective. To him its naïve aestheticism endowed it with more authenticity and honesty than he saw in the art of the genteel tradition. Its combination of unaffected simplicity, archaism, and a formal reduction that stopped short of abstraction made it the ideal touchstone for Nadelman. Under the influence of American folk art many of his more troubling stylistic excesses vanished. In their place was a new directness and rigor. Folk art provided the catalyst for Nadelman replacing the icy, detached elegance of bronze with the warmer, more down-to-earth feeling of wood, now his favored material. And it moved him away from nudes and partial figures into anecdotal subjects—the social elite and the world of manners in contemporary New York. This change anchored his work for the first time in the realm of modern experience, even if it was modern experience at its most rarified. It is a pity that only one example of this phase of Nadelman's work, the Modern's *Woman at the Piano,* could be borrowed for the Janis show. The Wadsworth Atheneum's *Dancer,* a coiffured woman doing a high kick, would have been a welcome addition. The pieces of this period—depicting a world of manicured, stylishly dressed men and women, bouffant hairdos and derby hats—constitute the artist's strongest claim upon posterity, for he is at his best in them: succinct, witty, at his most purely sculptural and modern. The constraints of Neo-classical pictorialism are at their most distant here as Old World charm and modernist formalism exist in perfect equilibrium.

After these folk art-inspired works, which is to say after about 1919, Nadelman's work takes a bizarre turn. As if refuting his own past, in the final two decades of his life he annuls practically every previous aesthetic



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position. His figures inflate, progressively stifling any feeling of articulation and rhythm as they become more like balloons and, finally, like heaps of whipped cream. At the same time the limbs and facial features become less and less distinct, surfaces slacken, and contours all but disappear. The only way to display these sculptures properly is to train a single light on them so that they emerge, as it were, from the shadows, and this is exactly what has been done at the Janis Gallery. These are Nadelman's most pictorial sculptures. Seurat's influence, which had previously furnished Nadelman with a precedent for his figure style, now makes itself felt in another way, in what Meyer Schapiro once described, in his essay on Seurat, as the "coming-into-being for the eye." They represent the culmination of the other side of his artistic personality, the anti-sculptural side.

The Janis Gallery had emphasized this side of Nadelman's sensibility in the earlier work by arranging a dozen or so pieces in receding horizontal rows, enforcing an almost entirely frontal reading. Still, it comes as something of a shock to see Nadelman's pictorialism given such free rein in the later work. We are back to generalized subjects, away from everyday life, and this development, combined with the formal indistinctness of the works, produces a startling shift in tone. The aura of unreality, of the dream world, becomes even more pronounced, finally enveloping everything. In these works Nadelman withdraws from the contemporary world, and, in the process, one feels, from sculpture itself.

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Books

Brancusi, Brancusi

by Sidney Geist

There has never been a scholarly Brancusi industry here or in Western Europe, and we seldom see an article on the sculptor other than the substantial journalistic response to public events, like exhibitions or the 1927-28 *Bird in Space* trial (duty-able object of manufacture or duty-free work of art?)—surely an odd state of affairs: half of Brancusi's sculptures are in the United States, and there is the ever-growing opinion that he is the most important sculptor of the century. The situation is rather different in Rumania, where Brancusi, as a public subject, was rehabilitated only in the late Fifties—after his death in 1957—when the authorities recognized in him a great potential for favorable publicity. Rehabilitation reached a climax in the international Brancusi Colloquium held in Bucharest in 1967. The bibliography of Barbu Brezianu's monograph on the sculptor (1974) lists five hundred items—notes, articles, and books—touching upon Brancusi that were published in Rumania since the end of the Fifties. This is a remarkable record for a geographical area smaller than the state of Oregon. Anyone in Rumania who has an opinion on anything has one on Brancusi. He is, to be sure, a valid reason for national pride.

This pride has sometimes assumed inordinate forms. For example, this article's light-opera title (whose small point will be apparent in a moment) was actually the title of a 1976 book by V. G. Paleolog, a prolific Brancusian whose writings on the sculptor hover on the brink of idolatry. A much more dependable critic is the art historian Petru Comarnescu, although his writing is marked, like Paleolog's, by a distorting chauvinism that is happily absent from a later generation, represented by Brezianu and I. Pogo-rolovschi. Brezianu's copious book was translated into English in 1976, but unfortunately had almost no distribution here. We must look back to 1978 for the last available full-length work in English on Brancusi, one by myself.

It is with high anticipation, then, that we turn to the two large volumes on the sculptor that have appeared in the past year, both translated from the French, both written by expatriate Rumanians, one with Swedish assistance.[1]

The first, by Radu Varia and entitled *Brancusi,* is immediately recognizable as a glamorous product of the coffee-table genre. There is no reason why Brancusi shouldn't get the glamour treatment, but we sense an extravagance on leafing to a title page composed of two "gatefolds" that, when spread open, measure 46½ inches across—a record, I am told. Nevertheless, Varia's adventurous text and the exertions of his prose make it

1 The two volumes are *Brancusi,* by Radu Varia, translated by Mary Vaudoyer and published by Rizzoli (319 pages, $75), and *Brancusi,* by Pontus Hultén, Natalia Dumitresco, and Alexandre Istrati, published by Abrams (336 pages, $75).

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clear that he means to be read, and we soon realize that the muchness of the title page is a proper prelude to verbal excess. This book has elements that seem to be recurrent in works on Brancusi, but its literary style—relentlessly overblown, numbingly flamboyant—puts it into a class by itself. Although writing in the tradition of the baroque Paleolog, Varia takes off from it by a quantum leap.

His first and most important theme is the identity of the destinies of Brancusi and Milarepa, an eleventh-century Tibetan poet-monk who achieved sainthood. Milarepa's biography was written in the twelfth century; its French translation was Brancusi's pillow book. Jetsun Milarepa has not gone unmentioned in the Brancusi literature: he appears in the second chapter, called "Metaphysical Background," of Carola Giedion-Welcker's study (1959)—but Varia has raised the ante on the subject. His opening chapter, "The Light of the Eternal Mountains," is devoted to establishing the Tibetan connection and the sainthood of Brancusi, and he does so in over six and a half thousand words. Now, the French translation of the Milarepa biography was published in 1925, when Brancusi was forty-nine years old. Giedion-Welcker dealt with this possibly nettlesome fact by proposing a Brancusi finding "confirmation" in Milarepa and "reaching across the centuries." Here is Varia on the subject: "Brancusi knew the meaning of the Jetsun Kahbum [the biography] long before he knew the book itself . . . . The nocturnal summons to ultimate heights, the occult nature of his trajectory, and the nameless voice that sustained him over the years were the same that had governed Milarepa's redemptive itinerary a thousand years before . . . . Engaged in the same spiritual struggle, Milarepa and Brancusi would finally unite beyond time, beyond the idea of time, under the same triumphal gates of victory."

But Varia offers a fresh contribution to Brancusi scholarship in the form of the Craiova Fraternity, which we are told existed in the west Rumanian city where Brancusi studied at the School of Crafts for four years. Varia writes of masonic companions "long constituted in corporative secret societies" who were "dissimulated" in Craiova either as artisans or "among professors . . . at the School of Crafts. We can name several of the latter." And he names five teachers who "were among [Brancusi's] most discreet and effective protectors." Were these five professors "dissimulated" members of the Fraternity or just five teachers? How does Varia know that they became "protectors," that they were "discreet and effective"? He mentions "a strange figure, Visconti, the painter," and "the William Watson manuscript found in Newcastle-on-Tyne in 1890." Not a footnote on the manuscript or the painter. "Was Constantin Brancusi admitted to Guild initiation in 1894? Did he become one of the Brothers of Craiova charged with the task of handing on 'the light under the bushel'? All evidence converges in this direction." Varia is constantly putting 2 and 2 together and getting 22.

Another contribution concerns an escapade of Brancusi's boyhood, his leaving home and working briefly with a dyer on the edge of Tîrgu-Jiu, some ten miles from his village. We have known of it, but not its real significance. "This apprenticeship," says Varia, "was his first abrupt contact with the activating influences of the fraternities that surreptitiously perpetuated [sic] in Oltenia and throughout south-eastern Europe, with the elevated long-standing doctrines of the science of living colors that descended perhaps from the third Egyptian dynasty and with the primordial cult of Hathor-Astarte, the goddess of the Green Stone . . . . Dyers by day, alchemists by night?" he asks. "They came to be known as moon-dyers." For one initiated into their company "there have never been more than two distinct possibilities, the humid or the dry path . . . . Brancusi was not obliged to renounce the humid path himself, rather the path rejected him. He was not recognized as being essentially, or eventually, one of their kind." Wet path, dry path—Mama Brancusi collected her eleven-year-old and took him home.

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Thirdly there is the Celtic motif. Brancusi was born in "the heart of the wide valleys encompassed by the Carpathian Mountains and the Danube . . . lands redolent with Celtic mythology." We read that "Joyce, one of Brancusi's intimate friends, was subject by and through him to the fathomless mystery of the ancient Celtic worlds." But twenty pages later the story undergoes a small change: "The spiral of Destiny, as envisaged by Giambattista Vico, would rally [Brancusi] to the Celtic spirit of James Joyce . . . . His memoryless quest through Celtic oblivion provided the horizon for his final heavenward flight." This is wild hagiography.

In our modern saint's life there were "probably many women," but two important loves. One was Eileen Lane, always referred to as Irish, never as American, which she was. At any rate, she "incarnated the bewitchment of Celtic poetry and sunlight"; not everyone is blessed with Celtic oblivion. In 1922, Brancusi took her on a "long Irish journey"—to Rumania.

Earlier the sculptor had "experienced the tremendous trial that ensued from his fearsome liaison with Marie Bonaparte, 'Princesse X.' In her Brancusi was to plumb the depths of primordial darkness, of downward-striving telluric powers of a psychic nonspiritual order. She was a wild, unconscious, glorious being with a destructive mutilating nature. She was a creature of the earth, of the Stygian hidden ardor of the earth, out of which flow life-giving but anonymous tectonic powers, heavy with the weight of planetary, sublunar respiration. She was, in the long run, the instrument of a fathomless blinding force." Reading such a passage requires a willing suspension of disbelief. It is about the woman who, in the long run, was the founder of the Société Psychanalytique de Paris and rescued Freud from Vienna. I have never seen any evidence of a liaison between Brancusi and Marie Bonaparte, nor does Varia offer any.

Like other works on Brancusi, this one cannot deal with its subject without constantly invoking all the great names and texts in the history of thought, as though Brancusi's eminence were to be established by association. Balzac, the Bhagavad Gita, Blavatsky, Bloy, Buddha, the Cabala, Calvino, Coomaraswami, Dante . . . In this book I see for the first time a poem by Huang-Chong-Ki; I am just as weak on Empedocles; and Blavatsky remains a closed book for me. But two quotations closer to my interests brought me to attention. The epigraph to Giedion-Welcker's study of 1959 was the following: "The movements which work revolutions in the world are born out of the dreams and visions in a peasant's heart on the hillside. For them the earth is not an exploitable ground but the living mother—James Joyce, Ulysses." This seems an apt citation. Brancusi was a shepherd as a child, watching the animals sometimes, doubtless, on a hillside. And Joyce knew him: they met when Harry and Caresse Crosby enlisted Brancusi to do a portrait of Joyce for a slender volume of pieces by the writer. Yet the passage (Chap. 9, lines 104-7 in the Gabler edition) doesn't sound like Joyce, that is, like Dedalus/Joyce. And, indeed, in *Ulysses* it is uttered by AE (George Russell), whose agrarian views Stephen Dedalus (and Joyce) mistrusted. The citation is misleading in attributing to Joyce sentiments that were not his. This was probably an innocent attribution by the Swiss Giedion-Welcker. The passage from *Ulysses* is repeated, surely just as innocently, by the Rumanian Varia, and even misquoted, while acquiring a typical "great" before "movements." A more egregious "quotation" is one from Rimbaud, who is made to say, *"Je suis un autre."* I like to imagine the poet retorting to Varia, "You're another."

The work of Brancusi attracts devotees, poet-philosophers, seers—it seems to create them—writers who upon looking at a sculpture are struck with instantaneous and profound insight. Typically, they never suppose that a work may have a history (other than a relation to the primordial past) or that it had a significance for the artist when it was made. Varia is the latest member of this group, and it is instructive to observe how he deals with a pair of related works.

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"In 1907," he writes, "Constantin Brancusi carved the relatively small but enigmatic idol that he called *Wisdom of the Earth.* If we exclude the *Ancient Figure, Wisdom of the Earth* stands out in Brancusi's work as absolutely unique, with neither ancestry or antecedents. It seems alien to his own mode of sculpture, like a providential found object[!] . . ."—and so on. We are first struck by the "but," which implies that the work is enigmatic in spite of being small. Then there is the curious matter of being "absolutely unique" if we exclude something that spoils the case, a painful device necessitated by the rhetoric of the absolute. Then there are questions of fact (if it is relevant to raise them in this context) concerning the name, the vaunted uniqueness, and the date. *Wisdom of the Earth* was a name used by Brancusi only in Rumanian, as for example when the work was exhibited in Bucharest in 1910. It and *Ancient Figure* were called *La Sagesse* when Brancusi addressed French or English speakers. The former was captioned *La Sagesse* in 1925 in *This Quarter,* an American magazine published in Paris, and the latter had the same title, *La Sagesse,* when it was shown in London in 1916. *Ancient Figure,* in any case, is not Brancusi's title, but one the work acquired when it entered the Art Institute of Chicago. (These matters are documented in an article I published in the catalogue of a Brancusi show in 1976.) As for the lack of "ancestry and antecedents," *Wisdom* follows and stylistically resembles *The Kiss* in this work's first appearance as two embracing half-figures; it has a clear descendant in *The Kiss* of Montparnasse Cemetery, two embracing and seated full-figures. Here the pose of the woman is very like that of *Wisdom,* a seated figure with legs drawn up, and the work has a rigor similar to that of *Ancient Figure.* In fact *Wisdom,* or the first version of *La Sagesse,* as I now call it in my catalogue, is in the middle of a series of thematically and formally related works, which are followed by two others in the same style. The whole group, beginning with *The Kiss,* has a double ancestry in Fauve images by Matisse and a sculpture by Derain, *Crouching Figure.* The date gives Varia pause, not the date of *Wisdom* but of *Ancient Figure.* In an atypical note he states: "It is . . . inconceivable that after creating a masterpiece such as *Wisdom of the Earth* in 1907, Brancusi would have spent his time working on a trial run for this same sculpture. We can safely assume that *Ancient Figure* dates from the beginning of 1907." To the beginning of 1907 belong two versions of *Torment* and three equally realistic busts of young boys in bronze. In April, Brancusi got the commission for which he made a life-size realistic figure in plaster, *The Prayer,* on which he at once set to work. There follow eight realistic carved and modeled heads that must precede *The Kiss* and *La Sagesse,* both highly stylized works. There simply is no room early—or late!—in 1907 for *Ancient Figure.* In *This Quarter* Brancusi dated *La Sagesse* 1908. One doesn't have to be a connoisseur to see that *Ancient Figure* follows it. As I showed in my 1976 article, we know that a real woman was portrayed in *La Sagesse,* since Brancusi modeled a bust of her, and we know who she was. This puts a rather different light on the matter than that thrown by the smoky lamp of deep antiquity.

Yet Varia validates *Wisdom of the Earth* by an example from neolithic Rumania, the *Thinker* (so-called, of course) of c. 2500 B.C., in terra cotta. Height is given as 6¼ inches, but should be 4½ inches. This object was found (!) in Cernavoda in 1956; it is a splendid primitive work that bears no resemblance to anything by Brancusi, but the claim is made that it offers "unexpected providential confirmation of the high degree of authentic inspiration that led Brancusi to carve . . . *Wisdom of the Earth* in 1907." The *Thinker* shows a man seated on a low stool, elbows on knees, "with hands," according to Varia, "lifted to the brow in the gesture indicative of the investiture in mankind of the flame of inspired thought." (Actually there is a rather blank look on the rudimentary face.) But it is plain to see in the excellent photograph directly above that both his hands are jammed against his cheeks.

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What, finally, are we to think of these words, attributed to Brancusi: "*Wisdom of the Earth* was my attempt to plumb the oceanic depths, to penetrate the furthest reaches of antiquity. My terror was immense when I lifted the veil, for Woman must never be revealed in her nakedness, unveiled. Isis must ever be hidden . . . . *Wisdom of the Earth* was for me femininity in its oceanic dimensions . . . ." They sound to me like pure, unadulterated Varia.

The other new book—by Pontus Hultén, Natalie Dumitresco, and Alexandre Istrati, and also called simply *Brancusi*—is as elaborate and formidable a production as the first, but is intended instead for the library table. It comprises a long introductory essay and a mass of documentary material. These are joined only by the binding, the data in the second part often belying the vague assertions in the first. The essay is provided by Pontus Hultén, a very well-known figure in the world of art: after being the first director of the Centre Georges Pompidou he became an ambassador-at-large to the arts, opening museums, co-ordinating exhibitions of Futurism, of Jean Tinguely, and writing about Brancusi. His essay is dated 1983; it is divided into sections of varying lengths. In the first, "Brancusi and the concept of sculpture," the opening words are: "A work of sculpture was an object of a very special kind, according to the belief generally held at the beginning of the century. It still is, but meanwhile the context of that perception has changed considerably." The first sentence has the lilt of Malraux's first sentence in *The Voices of Silence*—"A Romanesque crucifix was not regarded by its contemporaries as a work of sculpture"—although it doesn't tell us as much, and the second sentence leaves us stranded in a conceptual never-never land. Under "The Fauves" we read: ". . . Brancusi and Matisse are rather two of a kind. Intuitive and watchful, they kept up with their times . . . . They went about their work in rather a private manner, most of the time paying little attention to the other arts . . . ." The section "Brancusi and his contemporaries in the early twentieth century" is nineteen lines long. "The corporeal values of sculpture" begins thus: "In comparing Brancusi's oeuvre with all sculpture that had come before, a number of fundamental differences become evident. These are not always easy to define." The Renaissance is easier to deal with: "Central to the Renaissance tradition is the concept that sculpture should be isolated from its surroundings . . . ."

Rarely does Hultén confront a specific work. When he does, as in the case of *The Newborn,* a much stylized head of a child, it is to say that the human skull contains "the mysterious electrochemical apparatus known as the brain," which makes the head "the most emotionally charged form imaginable" —a statement that might be made about any sculptured head. When his comment is historical, it echoes with all that is left unexplained: "Brancusi obviously showed great interest in the work of the Fauves and cubists—we see the repercussions in the evolution of his art." That comment can simply be false when he says, for example, "early in his career, especially when he lived in Bucharest, Brancusi's quest was rather a lonely one"—his quest for a purpose for sculpture *"other"* than representation. There is not a jot of evidence on these matters, and Hultén's statement makes one doubt that he is acquainted with the sculpture done in Bucharest, which Brancusi left at the age of twenty-seven. That work demonstrates his seriousness and an academic skill—nothing that approaches, for instance, the *Father Eymard* or *The Man with the Broken Nose,* both done by Rodin before he was twenty-four. Brancusi was a very bright young man who, after all, was educated in provincial schools where there was no sign of a destiny for sculpture apart from representation. Not even a simple matter of fact comes out right, as when Hultén states that Brancusi made thirty-nine birds in bronze and stone, an obvious miscount.

It is not surprising that Hultén occasionally agrees with Varia. The latter says, "ultimately [life in Paris] left little mark on

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[Brancusi]." Hultén notes Brancusi's "splendid isolation"—which nonetheless permitted him to show great interest in the Fauves and Cubists. His sculpture, Hultén continues, was "always quite independent of all other sculpture." Beginning at what point? we must ask. But history is a casualty with these writers. Both belittle the role of African sculpture in Brancusi's development. On the other hand, there is my long article in *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art* (1984), whose conclusion was that African art was the most important influence in Brancusi's career. Marvelous to relate, Hultén, like Varia, repeats Giedion-Welcker's Joyce quotation. How are we to understand this recurrence? It's not *déjà vu* since we *know* we have seen it before; it's not sexy enough to be Eternal Return or even repetition-compulsion. It can only be the broken record of a criticism that has nothing to offer. Hultén's essay provides not a single insight. Given twenty-four thousand words and the laws of chance, one would not have thought such a feat possible.

The rest of the volume, five-sixths of it, is documentary, compiled from something designated as the Istrati-Dumitresco Archives, and strung together by this husband-and-wife team in chronological order. They include letters, odd writings of Brancusi, exhibition catalogues, pictures of sculpture, people, and places, reproductions of drawings, and important documents, such as birth certificate, identity cards, official letters, newspaper clippings, bills. There are eight gouaches reproduced in color that we have never seen before, each one designated as being in a "private collection." All of these items are embedded in over two hundred and fifty pages of text printed in three columns of smallish type. Most of this matter should be of interest to anyone interested in Brancusi. The Istratis rarely analyze the material except to make "insightful" remarks about the sculpture: "The childlike head of Brancusi's *Prometheus* is so advanced in its virtual absence of detail that its spirit seems to dance about it like a flame. The form is so elementary, so fragile, yet it is charged with the nobility of human achievement."

Yet in spite of the mass of source material, there is nothing, I think, that changes in an important way anything we have known or thought. What this means, sadly, is that most of what we know for certain as the result of the efforts of a handful of researchers for thirty years could have been known by 1970 if the Istratis had not sat on their archives for over twenty years. Let me not give the impression that we do not benefit by them. They provide constant confirmation of much that we know. We can see that many of the stories about Brancusi, even those of an apocryphal cast, are indeed true and/or have their source in Brancusi. The Istratis never put 2 and 2 together. For instance, they have Brancusi's statement that he would not work for Rodin because "nothing grows under the shadow of the great trees," and also the record of his having worked for Rodin. But they never reach the conclusion that he made his famous remark when he left Rodin.

Included here are several precious letters from Margit Pogany; without explanation, one is interrupted by three dots, the sign of an excision. There are letters from Baroness Frachon, the model for *Sleeping Muse*. There is one from Ezra Pound excusing himself for having proposed to write a study of Brancusi, an idea the sculptor probably rejected. The 1907 contract of the commission for a cemetery monument in Rumania, which liberated Brancusi from Rodin's studio, is published in all its careful detail.

In 1924, Brancusi put some driftwood together on the beach at St. Raphaël, called it Temple of the Crocodile, and took some snapshots of it. Mme. Roché once lent me a set of them that I published in 1968. I thought this "temple"—a sparse, very open affair—was one of those things a sculptor might pass the time with while taking the sun. But behind the Temple of the Crocodile is a story, as Brancusi tells it, of a mythical nature. We had known of Brancusi's way of mythologizing the events of his life, but

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there has never been an example as full as this one. We had known too that his right leg was broken in 1918—he mentioned it in a letter. Now we know how, precisely when and where, and how it was handled. The matter doesn't seem to touch on Brancusi's art. Yet it leaves its mark on the beautiful gouache of the studio, dated 1918, in the Museum of Modern Art: to the right of center is a heavy black line with a u-curve at the upper end, a cane. I have known this for a long time, but now we can date the gouache closely since it was done between the end of October, when Brancusi returned to Paris, and the new year. We learn that over seventy prominent people, including Mme. Curie and Picasso, signed a protest to the banning of *Princess X* from the Salon of 1920. But we don't learn much concerning the trial over the status of *Bird in Space.*

There is little sign of what the Istratis have not chosen to include, yet they could occasionally have been more selective. Four hundred words are given to recounting how the owner of *The Cock,* MOMA, lost the piece—and found it again. And they could have been more careful with details: inadequate photographs of early work are published because they were taken by Brancusi; a full-page color plate of the first marble *Mlle. Pogany* is printed in reverse (but correctly on the facing page), as is a color plate of *The Muse* (correctly oriented on the same page). Because of total reliance on their archives and inattention to findings published in the periodical literature, they have caused many errors large and small to creep into their text. The bibliography in the American edition, compiled by still another hand, is just a sop to scholarship.

This is intended to be the everything book on Brancusi—the slip jacket of the French version calls it "the most complete and original." And so it is rounded out with a catalogue. Now, a catalogue requires care, not just the copying of documents, and the Istratis are not careful. Lost works, known from photographs, are published here as elsewhere; but two, published over ten years ago, are missing, as well as two works in marble long displayed at the Musée National d'Art Moderne. Extraordinarily, they publish a photograph of *Prometheus* in black marble. They place it in the MNAM and even give it an inventory number. The museum does not have this work; it is, for the time being, lost. The catalogue includes two pieces of furniture, a piece of driftwood and a plank with three holes in it, labeled *Portrait,* which Brancusi gave the Istratis. They also list the numerous metal casts they have made since his death. In the case of the *Grand Coq* in stainless steel, they give its width as smaller than the width of the plaster original in the MNAM. In fact the width of the steel cast is greater than that of the plaster. Since the steel cast *should* be smaller—as the result of shrinkage of the metal upon cooling—the "original" is a confection of some kind. At the end of the catalogue the Istratis give catalogue numbers to eight pieces of furniture carved by the sculptor and in the museum in Paris, as well as to thirty-five household objects. mostly made of tin, which they own. Caveat emptor.

A dark question hangs over these objects and the archives: How did the Istratis come by them? They do not say; and among the many documents they reproduce we do not find Brancusi's will, a single typewritten page assigning them a sum of money, some stocks, and a deed to a parcel of land in Paris. What a sad fate for Brancusi, consummate artist and master craftsman, who never permitted any of his assistants to work on his bronzes, that his sculpture should now be cast in series by two painters who never touched his work when he was alive.

Another question arises: Why do the faults of these books appear in so much of the Brancusi literature? I can't help thinking they are, in a sense, a compliment to the sculptor—he turns people's heads. Some writers feel there is a "Brancusi secret"—Varia even uses these words. Others seek to explain the ineffable. Most treat Brancusi as a monolithic concept. What is missing in both books is a close study of any single sculpture—its formal character, its poetic or artistic source, or an examination of the

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relations between the works; they give no evidence of growth or development.

There are, of course, many ways of writing about an artist. Brezianu, besides cataloguing the Rumanian works, has brilliantly explored the social background of the sculptor. One would welcome a parallel poem if it had points of correspondence with the sculpture. The imagery of many of the sculptures remains unexamined. Very little has been done on the psychology of Brancusi. And it is time that we heard from a much younger generation of writers than those who have occupied the field to date. The work I would like to see would be *Brancusi: Iconography and Sources.*

In the nature of the architect

Brendan Gill Many Masks:
A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright.
Putnam, 544 pages, $24.95

reviewed by Thomas Hines

The life and work of Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) has always seemed to call for the epic treatment. The late Arthur Drexler, for example, long-time director of the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art, confessed to me in 1981 that one of his life's ambitions was to "take over" the museum, as his colleague William Rubin had recently done with Picasso, and devote every available gallery space to a Wright retrospective. As we discussed this project over several long lunches in the early 1980s, we concluded that nothing less would be appropriate for documenting and interpreting Wright's colossal achievement.

First, there would have to be a long introductory section on Wright's antecedents from William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement to H. H. Richardson and the American Shingle Style. This would be followed by crucial moments in the architect's education, from his childhood discovery of Friedrich Froebel's kindergarten blocks to his Chicago apprenticeship with Louis Sullivan and his own early rendering in the 1890s of various late Victorian modes. Several galleries would be devoted to Wright's mature "Prairie Style" of the first decade of the twentieth century, during which time his low-slung villas included the great houses for the Willits, Heurtley, Robie, Gale, and Coonley families. Special attention would also be given to that same period's public and commercial monuments, particularly the Larkin Building, Buffalo, New York (1903), and Unity Temple, Oak Park, Illinois (1904).

Drexler was concerned that sufficient emphasis be placed on Wright's quantitatively meager and qualitatively underestimated "middle period" of the Teens and Twenties, in which he drew upon pre-Columbian sources in such controversial works as the Midway Gardens, Chicago (1913); the Imperial Hotel, Tokyo (1915); and the concrete-block houses of Los Angeles (1923-24). Note would be taken of Wright's tragically quiet period of the late Twenties and early Thirties, which was brightened only by the establishment, in the early Depression years, of the Taliesin Fellowship at his rural Wisconsin home and studio.

The final and largest part of this fantasized MOMA exhibition would treat the great work of Wright's renascent old age from the mid-1930s to the late 1950s, which included such masterworks as "Falling Water," Bear Run, Pennsylvania (1935); the Johnson Wax Buildings, Racine, Wisconsin (1936); the small, inexpensive "Usonian" houses of the late Thirties and Forties, as well as the Guggenheim Museum, completed only after the architect's death in 1959. Such an exhibition would require a massive catalogue, coinciding ideally with a multi-volumed critical biography of Wright of the scope of Leon Edel's study of Henry James.

Drexler did not live to realize this exhibition and no Edel has yet appeared to write the book that Wright deserves. Periodically,

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however, brave souls make valiant stabs at biographical synthesis, the latest of whom is Brendan Gill, who has previously written biographies of Cole Porter and Tallulah Bankhead. A pillar at *The New Yorker* for over fifty years, Gill recently moved from his long-held post as drama critic to the magazine's "Sky Line" column as architectural pundit.

Gill's flawed, but provocative, *Many Masks: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright* is described inaccurately in a publisher's blurb as "the first major biography of the renowned architect." This ignores such other "first" biographies of Wright as that by Robert Twombly, first published in 1973, with substantial revisions in a later edition. Behind Twombly's historical analysis lay such seminal critical treatments as Henry-Russell Hitchcock's *In the Nature of Materials: The Buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright, 1887-1941* (1942); Grant Manson's *Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910: The First Golden Age* (1958); and Norris Kelly Smith's *Frank Lloyd Wright: A Study in Architectural Content* (1966). Unfortunately, Gill's failure to cite such predecessors echoes Wright's own reluctance to acknowledge influences.

On the other side of the massive Wright bibliography are the several editions of the Master's *Autobiography,* first published in 1932, as well as the hagiological tributes of his wife, siblings, children, and disciples. Of the latter, the most balanced is Edgar Tafel's *Apprentice to Genius: Years With Frank Lloyd Wright* (1979).

Gill's meager documentation is one of the major problems of this book. Twombly's work, for example, is mentioned in the text but not cited in the scanty footnotes. Equally damaging to the book's integrity is the absence of a bibliography. These scholarly lacunae make it more difficult to distinguish between what is borrowed and what is genuinely original and will limit the usefulness of the work to future students and researchers.

The other major problem—Gill's style of presentation—is a more complicated matter. While there is fine and incisive writing throughout, there is also a curious antagonism between certain sluggish Victorian circumlocutions that should have been excised in the editing process and a "Talk of the Town" breeziness that may have been appropriate for Porter and Bankhead but is not appropriate for an artist of Wright's profundity. Among the gentle Victorianisms, endlessly repeated, are such tedious tics as "to my mind," "as we shall see," and "of which I spoke in the last chapter." There is too much journalistic evocation of "now" and "today," which gives us more sense of Gill, the author, and less of Wright, the subject, than we would like. This frequently deprives us of the feeling so essential to historical biography that we are there *with* Wright in specific times and places between his birth in 1867 and his death in 1959.

The book contains such pardonable errors as giving certain Wright clients the wrong first names, but in the less forgivable game of trivial pursuit we get facts and illustrations that clutter and distract. There is, for example, a totally puzzling photograph of the *gravestone* of the *parents* of Wright's ill-fated mistress, Mamah Cheney. In another section Gill informs us indulgently that after his interview with Wright's son David an "ice cold dry martini" was followed by lunch and golf. Elsewhere in the narrative a prospective client drives to meet Wright at the Plaza "in his little Simca." Such irrelevant details trivialize the important story that Gill is telling.

There are also occasional nonsensical locutions: "Wright's palimpsest," Gill writes, "is a three-dimensional toy, whose every page can be plumbed for ravishing scribbles." Gill's assertion that Wright's Storer House in Los Angeles is "less dignified than it looks" reminds one of Mark Twain's belief that Wagner's music was not as bad as it sounded. Indeed the author's Irish blarney is frequently equal to his subject's Welsh blarney. The eccentrically interesting, but minor, architect Bruce Goff, Gill solemnly asserts, is "one of the few architects whom one can speak of in the same breath with Wright." In addition to these verbal and judgmental

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lapses, the illustrations are generally weak, many of them being either too dark, small, or blurred for the essential role they should have in such a book.

Despite its weaknesses, however, Gill's book is the best and most engaging assessment to date of Wright's overall career. It succeeds in the difficult mission of introducing Wright to a lay audience and of offering new information and fresh insights to the experts. The latter achievement is a result, in part, of the author's close friendship with Wright and of his tapping of original sources unexploited by previous biographers. While the book eschews, to its detriment, the vital connections between Wright's work and the larger issues of twentieth-century culture, it is, on the whole, a penetrating analysis of Wright's achievement. *Many Masks* is an appropriately multivalent title for this multilayered life composed of complex and contradictory roles.

Better than any Wright interpreter before him, Gill, the drama critic, sees the drama in Wright's saga, hears the good lines, spotlights the key entrances and exits, and illuminates the tension in Wright's life between the comic and the tragic. As a youth, Wright lived in a variety of settings, from the Wisconsin farm of his mother's relatives to the various towns in the East and Middle West where his father worked as a minister. Never graduating from either high school or college, Wright left the University of Wisconsin in the late 1880s to seek his fortune in Chicago. In the neighboring suburb of Oak Park he married and had six children; in 1909, when he was just over forty, he eloped to Europe with a client, Mamah Cheney. With neither of the deserted spouses being willing to grant a divorce, Wright and Mamah escaped the scorn of their scandalized neighbors by retreating to Wright's ancestral Wisconsin farm, where he built his great house, Taliesin, in 1912.

During this time, Wright continued to commute to Chicago to supervise his dwindling number of commissions, and in 1914, while working on the Midway Gardens, he was summoned home to confront an extraordinary calamity. A demented servant had murdered Mamah, two of her visiting children, and several other staff members, and then had burned the house. Though he rebuilt Taliesin, Wisconsin and the Middle West now held too many painful memories, and Wright yielded to the impulse to get away to the sunnier climes of Japan and California. He was accompanied in these years by a new companion, Miriam Noel, who became increasingly neurotic and difficult after their marriage in 1923. Having separated from Miriam in the mid-1920s, Wright married his third wife, Olgivanna, a Montenegrin dancer and Gurdjieffian mystic, with whom he lived relatively happily the rest of his life. In the decades with Olgivanna, his practice resumed and flourished.

Gill's sensitive handling of this complex personal drama carries over into his interpretation of the buildings. The Larkin Building, he writes, "was designed to dominate and lend an air of grandeur to the quite ordinary factory buildings that made up the rest of the Larkin complex. The façade on Seneca Street rose skyward like some pagan temple carved millennia ago out of the rocky banks of the upper Nile."

Gill's sense of humor also retrieves, as no previous writer has done, the architect's own delicious wit, as well as the things he did and said that were not intentionally funny. Gill is attentive to the twinkle in the eye, the precocious child, the impish Mozartean playfulness. "You know," Wright once said to a Taliesin visitor, "a perfect democracy flourishes here at the fellowship. When I get hungry, we all eat." To a friend inquiring about Miriam Noel, his elusive second wife, Wright replied: "If you knew anything about wives (which, of course, you don't, having had only one), you would know they are not so easily mislaid as their husbands are misled." Not easily awed by heads of state, Wright quickly and characteristically assumed a first-name intimacy with them; when he first met President Roosevelt in Washington in the late 1930s, he ad-

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dressed him not just as Franklin, but as Frank. "Frank," he said upon entering the Oval Office, "you ought to get up out of that chair and look around at what they're doing to your city here, miles and miles of Ionic and Corinthian columns."

Gill's own wit and raconteurial skill, moreover, is frequently a match for that of the master. "Despite its great size," he says of Wright's late-1950s, 3,000-seat, grandly silly Gammage Auditorium in Arizona, "it has the unexpectant peek-a-boo daintiness of a boudoir; one wonders what can be holding it up and whether one ought to knock discreetly before entering." Gill's antennae also pick up the deliciously absurd. Students at Florida Southern College, for example, actually worked on the construction of the buildings Wright designed for their campus. They also, Gill notes, "generously contributed their urine; collected daily and mixed in a carboy with salt and muriatic acid, it made a brew that, upon being applied to the copper used as a decorative element throughout the college, hastened the process by which its bright orange hue oxidized into a permanent soft blue-green."

Yet Gill is also convincingly sympathetic to the difficult and frequently tragic sides of Wright's nature. He courageously takes on the Taliesin cult, presided over until recently by Wright's late widow, Olgivanna. By denying Wright's faults, she and they made him less believable as an artist and human being. Gill balances that distortion by revealing Wright's frailties, and hence allowing us to appreciate his humanity and his genius more fully. He has built much of his story on the unacknowledged researches of scholars who have established incontestably that Wright lied about innumerable things throughout his life, including most notoriously the year in which he was born. It was 1867, not 1869, as Wright claimed most of his life. "He was a virtuoso at bearing false witness," Gill believes, "which is to say that he sometimes lied in the name of self-promotion and at other times he seems to have lied simply for the pleasure it gave him." Wright frequently behaved most irresponsibly with those closest to him. His son, Lloyd, for example, supervised the construction of his father's Storer House in Los Angeles and was constantly frustrated by his father's negligence, elusiveness, and failure to stay in touch, "except when blame was to be assigned."

In the same "middle period" of the Teens, Twenties, and early Thirties, Wright indeed courted disaster in both his personal and professional life. "Like Sullivan," Gill observes, "Wright believed that the world was perversely out of step with him, not he with the world; Sullivan destroyed himself in the course of asserting this belief, as Wright again and again threatened to destroy himself. In the light of his innumerable autumnal triumphs, people tend to forget how close he came to meeting Sullivan's fate." Yet Wright averred to Lloyd that there were ways of confronting the problems of life that were not unlike the various strategies that enabled one to create art.

Part of Wright's secret in coping with life and work derived from the fact that he remained, in Gill's words, "invincibly youthful in spirit and that . . . youthfulness sustained him through many a dark passage. He would leap out of bed in the morning convinced that some unlooked-for good fortune was just about to provide a single happy solution to his multiplicity of problems; if, by nightfall, the solution had not arrived, tomorrow was another day. Meanwhile, there was the inescapable Protestant obligation to keep oneself busy." Wright's genius at conceptualizing designs and then giving them a three-dimensional presence on paper was frequently exhibited with such agility that it seemed easy. Yet Gill's suggestion that this was done "as if by magic—certainly without prolonged and painful effort" may underestimate how difficult such effort actually was.

Gill's appreciation of Wright's genius, however, does not prevent him from finding problems in Wright's architecture. In making his artistic statement, Wright did frequently impose his will in a way that intimi-

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dated while it excited. Indeed, to many of the original and subsequent owners of his buildings, Gill suggests, Wright "exists as a sort of invisible resident despot, whose disapproval they dread incurring." Wright's work could never have been accused of being "contexturalist" or "preservationist," two values highly prized during the time Gill was writing his book. Instead, "Wright felt an irritated impatience with the past . . . . [T]here was scarcely a building since Nineveh that Wright wouldn't have rejoiced to knock down in order to put one of his own in its place." He pretended, Gill quips, "all his life to admire nature, but what he liked was to alter it."

In his explication of individual buildings, Gill gives an effective accounting of how the structures look and how effectively they function. He prefers such works as the "light" and "cozy" Heath house, Buffalo, New York (1905), over the nearby "dark" and "heavy" Martin house because of its relatively low, small "human" scale and its *gemütlich,* ground-hugging horizontality. In fact, Gill's fondness for the smaller, cozier buildings blinds him to the importance of Wright's larger, more adventurous, more "expressionistic" statements, in the design of which Wright clearly took more risks. Those works which were *not* light and cheery, those bold strokes that broke away from "Prairie" and "Usonian" norms to explore in new directions, are seen usually by Gill as being only "weird" and "grotesque." The regal Dana house, Springfield, Illinois (1902), is "a folly . . . a freakish structure." Wright's epochal "Hollyhock House," Los Angeles (1920), is "grim," and its "strange," slightly earlier pre-Columbian predecessor, the "exceptionally ugly" A. D. German warehouse, Richland Center, Wisconsin (1915), is "perhaps the most depressing work to come from Wright's hand."

Though Gill deals sensitively with the tragic element in Wright's personal life, he is unable to appreciate sufficiently evidence of the same tragic sense in his architecture. Much that Wright designed became art despite its occasional functional lapses and its frequently expressionistic formidability. Gill's views on Wingspread (1937), the Herbert Johnson house in Racine, Wisconsin, illustrate his somewhat limited perspective in this regard. The house, Gill notes, "bespeaks a technical bravado . . . instead of the cozy domesticity that Wright was so eloquent a champion of in his small houses." In view of these fairly consistent tastes, it is not clear why Gill celebrates the hideous, but otherwise unexceptional, Beth Sholom synagogue (1954) in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, for that building is "Expressionism" run rampant.

Gill is impressive in his analysis of many aspects of Wright's life and work, but he does not press sufficiently Wright's connections with the larger international architectural culture. He offers illuminating comparisons of Wright's Prairie period with the Viennese *Secessionstil* of Otto Wagner and Josef Olbrich, particularly in the similarities between the Larkin Building and Unity Temple and Olbrich's contemporary Secession Building in Vienna. But there is not enough attempt to place Wright's contribution within the history of the modern movement.

Gill does, on the other hand, try to deal with Wright's political behavior on both the national and international scene, although here, too, he could have given us more. As a child of the Wisconsin Progressive tradition, Wright considered himself a socially conscious person. And while he had no illusions about either Hitler or Stalin, he urged Americans to avoid moral piety and "not to assume the right to criticize Fascism and Communism abroad when we had so many political evils at home that we were failing to deal with." His inherited Middle Western isolationism made him side, in the late Thirties and early Forties, with the controversial Lindbergh lobby. Despite his growing awareness and horror over the atrocities at hand, he felt great pain at the thought of America's being at war with two of the countries—Germany and Japan—whose cultures he most admired, and in which his own work had been most revered.

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Wright's passion for Japanese and German culture and his characterization of America as the "mobocracy" raises the question, not dealt with by Gill, of what exactly Wright, and Sullivan before him, meant when they referred to a "democratic architecture." If "democracy" refers to activities "of, for, and by the people," very few great buildings designed by architects can be given that label. Architecture, at its best, is frequently "of" and "for" the "people," but seldom "by" them except in "folk" and "vernacular" expressions. The situation is analogous to the less often asked questions about a "democratic" medicine. The best physicians indeed "consult" their patients and try to involve them in the healing process, but responsible surgery, like responsible architecture, is seldom performed "by" the people paying for it. Wright and Sullivan never faced up to such facts rhetorically, though their sometimes imperious attitudes to clients acknowledged it implicitly.

Gill's book is damaged by its avoidance of such issues. It does not place Wright sufficiently into the long context of history. Yet it is, despite its flaws, a valuable addition to the biographical and critical literature on Wright. "Whatever his career may have cost others in suffering," Gill concludes, "it strikes us now as producing a gift to the world that far outweighs the persistent, outrageous selfishness of the giver—a gift that transforms his selfishness into generosity." *Many Masks* is the right title for this book. "The key to wearing a mask successfully," Gill insists, "is of course to be aware at every moment that it is indeed a mask, and Wright never faltered in that respect; the adornment of his person, like the eloquence of his speech [and architecture] was simultaneously who he was and who he pretended to be."

Early in his life Wright had opted for "honest arrogance" over dishonest humility. Yet ultimately even he may have undervalued his stature. He *was* the greatest of American architects—this wearer of many masks, who accomplished miracles.

Death and the poet

Howard Nemerov War Stories: Poems about Long Ago and Now. University of Chicago Press, 60 pages, $10.95

reviewed by Robert Richman

"They say the war is over," writes Howard Nemerov in "Redeployment," one of his most memorable early poems. "But water still/Comes bloody from the taps." Today, thirty-seven years after writing these lines, Nemerov's whole outlook on life is still haunted by the memory of war. This is the impression one has from Nemerov's new book, *War Stories: Poems about Long Ago and Now*. Nearly a third of the poems in this volume have their source in the poet's experiences, between 1942 and 1944, as a flying officer in the Royal Canadian Air Force, and as a first lieutenant, during the final two years of the conflict, in the U.S. Army Air Force. In the RAF, Nemerov's missions included the bombing of German shipping boats on the North Sea. A few poems are based directly on this experience, and others treat of the more banal aspects of war, such as Nemerov's dealings with his colleagues in the air force and his training as a flyer.

Nemerov's poetic response to war is not unusual. The dispassionate, ironic voice of the poems in *War Stories* has also been employed to good effect in the war poems of Randall Jarrell and Karl Shapiro. All the same, it is a fitting response to the particular absurdity Nemerov witnessed—what he calls the bloodless "clean war, the war in the air." Here is a poem entitled "The Faith":

> "There are those for whom war is a
> vocation . . . . They are mystic soldiers,
> devout—and killing is their calling.
> What of them?"—*Kenneth Burke*

I knew a couple of these dedicates,
The ones that loved the life and volunteered
For more of it after they'd got home free
And honorably discharged with all the
gongs . . .

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One aimed his aircraft at a battle cruiser
(it turned out one of ours) and was blown
away;
The other signalled from behind the Frisians
That he and his crew were hit and going down,

His voice as neutral as the evening news
That we would hear on our return to base
That night: "From these and other operations
Seven of our aircraft failed to return.". . .

And here is "Night Operations, Coastal Command RAF":

Remembering that war, I'd near believe
We didn't need the enemy, with whom
Our dark encounters were confused and few
And quickly done, so many of our lot
Did for themselves in folly and misfortune.

Some hit our own barrage balloons, and some
Tripped over power lines, coming in low;
Some swung on takeoff, others overshot,
And two or three forgot to lower the wheels.

There were those that flew the bearing for the
course
And flew away forever; and the happy few
That homed on Venus sinking beyond the sea
In fading certitude. For all the skill,
For all the time of training, you might take
The hundred steps in darkness, not the next.

The truth is, another kind of war has always been in the forefront of Nemerov's consciousness. This is the war between man and the world that Nemerov considers to be the essential fact of the human condition. Indeed, the term "war stories" could be applied not just to Nemerov's many poems that deal with the Second World War but to most of the poems he has written. One has the sense that the poet turns so often to "real" war as a subject in his verse because he regards war as the most extreme example of the struggle between man and the spiritual void he occupies.

Nemerov has been called an existential poet, and for good reason. He believes that modern man must attempt an absurd task: to contrive meaning in a meaningless world. A poem that vividly reflects this existential stance is "Quaerendo Invenietis" (from *Gnomes and Occasions,* published in 1973). In this poem, Nemerov declares that "[w]ithout my meaning nothing, nothing means." An early war poem entitled "September Shooting" (from Nemerov's first book, *The Image and the Law,* published in 1947) also betrays something of existential philosophy. In it, the poet describes how an "anonymous bullet flies out of/An irrelevant necessity, and knows no evil."

Nemerov is commonly grouped with the other formalist poets of his generation—Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, Donald Hall, and Peter Davison. Yet despite possessing a sense of language and form equal to any of these poets, he has often been viewed as the black sheep of the group. No doubt this has to do with Nemerov's unalloyed pessimism. It is true, though, that where his contemporaries will focus on, say, a beautiful woman emerging from a townhouse door, Nemerov fastens his eye on a hapless soul who was tossed into a river, his feet cemented into a bucket. Where his contemporaries are on the lookout for spiritual presences in the world—presences that may enrich their lives—Nemerov insists that we must "sweat it [i.e., life] out." Nemerov bridles at the idea of transcendence: "darkness invades our day," he says in "Deep Woods," from *The Salt Garden* (1955); "[n]o meaning in it, but indifference." And he wonders sardonically, in "Lines & Circularities" (from *Gnomes & Occasions*), "How many silly miracles there are/That will not save us." When Nemerov does happen on a rainbow, he sees it in a polluted stream:

Oil is spilling down the little stream
Below the bridge. Heavy and slow as
blood,
Or with an idiot's driveling contempt:
The spectral film unfolding, spreading
forth
Prismatically in a breaking of rainbows . . . .

("The Breaking of the Rainbows")

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The eclipse—like the rainbow, admired by many poets as an example of the miraculousness of nature—is also unmasked as a fraud by Nemerov. In "During a Solar Eclipse," from the 1980 volume *Sentences* (the title itself is a diminishment of the book's contents), the poet concedes the eclipse's power to transform the day, but it cannot alter the speaker:

> The darkening disk of the moon before
> the sun
> All morning moves, turning our common day
> A deep and iris blue, daylight of dream
> In which we stand bemused and looking on
> Backward at shadow and reflected light,
>
> While the two great wanderers among the
> worlds
> Enter their transit with our third, a thing
> So rare that in his time upon the earth
> A man may see, as I have done, but four,
> In childhood two, a third in youth, and this
>
> In likelihood my last. We stand bemused
> While grass and rock darken, and stillness
> grows,
> Until the sun and moon slide out of phase
> And light returns us to the common life
> That is so long to do and so soon done.

The speaker is "bemused"—the word is used twice in three stanzas—preoccupied, dreamy, abstracted; but not in the least bit transfigured by the experience.

Inevitably, death is—with war—one of Nemerov's favorite subjects. Everything reminds Nemerov of death because everything leads to it. As he writes in "In the Glass of Fashion," from *The Image and the Law*:

> I am asked why I do not
> Stop writing about death
> And do something worth while.
> To write about what would be
> Not to write about death?

And in "The Goose Fish," from *The Salt Garden,* the "moony grin" of the dead fish's head mocks the lovers:

> On the long shore, lit by the moon
> To show them properly alone,
> Two lovers suddenly embraced
> So that their shadows were as one.
> The ordinary light was graced
> For them by the swift tide of blood
> That silently they took at flood,
> And for a little time they prized
> Themselves emparadised.
>
> Then, as if shaken by stage-fright
> Beneath the hard moon's bony light,
> They stood together on the sand
> Embarrassed in each other's sight
> But still conspiring hand in hand,
> Until they saw, there underfoot,
> As though the world had found them out,
> The goose fish turning up, though dead,
> His hugely grinning head.

While in "De Anima"—from *The Next Room of the Dream* (1962)—Nemerov argues that "what lovers bring/Into the world is death."

Nemerov's poetry is not completely devoid of any acknowledgement of beauty. But on the rare occasion when he does refer to the beautiful, what is usually honored is the poet's ability to generate that beauty. What is "affirmed" in these poems is the inherent worthlessness of nature. In the title poem of *The Blue Swallows* (1967), Nemerov writes:

> O swallows, swallows, poems are not
> The point. Finding again the world,
> That is the point, where loveliness
> Adorns intelligible things
> Because the mind's eye lit the sun.

An analogous message is voiced in "The Makers" (from *Sentences*). Here, the "idiot world" is sung not only into beauty but into being by the poet:

> Who can remember back to the first poets,
> The greatest ones, greater even than Orpheus?
> No one has remembered that far back
> Or now considers, among the artifacts
> And bones and cantilevered inference
> The past is made of, those first and greatest
> poets,

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So lofty and disdainful of renown
They left us not a name to know them by.

They were the ones that in whatever tongue
Worded the world, that were the first to say
Star, water, stone, that said the visible
And made it bring invisibles to view
In wind and time and change, and in the mind
Itself that minded the hitherto idiot world
Spoke the speechless world and sang the towers
Of the city into the astonished sky.

They were the first great listeners, attuned
To interval, relationship, and scale,
The first to say above, beneath, beyond,
Conjurors with love, death, sleep, with bread and wine,
Who having uttered vanished from the world
Leaving no memory but the marvelous
Magical elements, the breathing shapes
And stops of breath we build our Babels of.

This is Nemerov in his most confident mood. Even here, though, the poet's despair comes through. In his wish to get to "the truth of the matter" (the title of one of his earliest poems), Nemerov disdains certain poetical tools he judges will obscure the lucid expression of the "war" between man and universe. One such device is the sensuous image. Shifting clouds and misty mountains are rare in the Nemerovian oeuvre because imagery, in Nemerov's estimation, dilutes the dramatic contest at the heart of the poem. So does ornate language. Nemerov writes in bare, unadorned language because in his view it dispatches the "truth of the matter" best. The conclusion of "The Biographer's Mandate," from *War Stories,* is iambic pentameter at its most demotic—and, alas, most mediocre: "For we don't give a shit about his work./ These are the things we give a shit about."

In *War Stories,* Nemerov's wish to unearth "the truth of the matter" continues unabated. In "Economic Man," the poet contends that it is futile to look to nature for something to "profit by." Similarly, in "A Christmas Card of Halley's Comet," the poet remarks sarcastically how "[w]ords fail us" when faced with the enormity of the comet's meaninglessness. And in "On the Occasion of National Mourning"—written in the wake of the Challenger disaster—Nemerov comments that "the silvery platitudes/ Were waiting in their silos for just such/An emergent occasion . . . ."

In the book's war poems, Nemerov seeks to rid us of our illusions about military life. Since none of us any longer harbors illusions about military life, however, a few of the poems fall flat. In "IFF," for example, the poet confesses that while in the air force he spared Hitler "hardly a thought," but loathed instead "Corporal Irmin," "Wing Commander Briggs," "station C.O. Group Captain Ormery," and "my navigator Bert," who "shyly explained to me that the Jews/ Were ruining England." (A similar sentiment is expressed in Edward Thomas's 1915 poem, "This is no case of petty right or wrong.") In "Double Negative," meanwhile, what is "exposed" is the "wisdom" of a senior pilot Nemerov had received instruction from. The old pilot assured Nemerov that it was a cinch to stop firing when—"as it's almost bound to happen"—"one of your chaps/ Crosses his aircraft over in front of yours . . . ."

Though these poems may not be the last word in originality, they are harmless enough. But what are we to make of Nemerov's truth-seeking and plain speaking in the second half of the poem entitled "Crotchets"?

At Breakfast this Morning

She tells me out of the paper about this guy
He's got leukemia and into the bargain AIDS,
They give him maybe two more weeks to live
When the oxygen tank outside the room explodes
And he winds up in emergency and then
Intensive care all over third-degree burns.
But they saved his life, they brought him back.

So don't try to, she says, tell me there is no God.

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Nemerov is attracted to disaster like a moth to light, and it was perhaps inevitable that he would write a poem on AIDS. But why use it as the occasion for mirth? "Crotchets" may be too much, even for Nemerov's most sympathetic readers.

Actually, Nemerov has always had a penchant for jokes in his poetry. The poem alluded to above, for example, "The Truth of the Matter," revolves around a rather dark joke. In this poem, Nemerov writes of the "divine justice" of the death by diabetes of the head of a "great sugar refinery." The first two lines of "Ultima Ratio Reagan," from *War Stories,* constitute another, considerably lighter, attempt at humor: "The reason we do not learn from history is / Because we are not the people who learned last time."

Many commentators have criticized Nemerov for his taste for the sarcastic quip. In his 1966 essay "Attentiveness and Obedience," the poet tried to respond to these charges. He wrote, in part: "The charge typically raised . . . has been that my poems are jokes, even bad jokes. I incline to agree, insisting however that they are bad jokes, and even terrible jokes . . . ."

One way to view these jokes is as a purely defensive reaction—the reaction of a mind so overwhelmed by the world's despair that it has no other response available to it *but* humor and sarcasm. In this view, gags are the response of a mind at the end of its tether. If one perceives Nemerov's jokes this way, it is easy to construe them as positive signs that the mind is still functioning in the face of the onrushing void.

But this is not a very satisfactory explanation of the impulse behind *all* of Nemerov's jokes, particularly the offensive ones, as in "Crotchets." For a possible clue to the impulse behind this dark humor, one must turn to Nemerov's 1965 prose volume *Journal of the Fictive Life.* In this book, Nemerov made a revealing statement. He wrote, "I hate intelligence, and it is all I have."

The joke at the end of "Crotchets," and the joke about the sugar man's death, are jokes at their most vulgar and unappealing. Could these attempts at humor actually be the poet's desire to punish his intelligence for denying him a bigger poetic response to the world, by showing that intelligence in the worst possible light? Could it be that Nemerov wishes to exact revenge on his hated intelligence for forcing him to write verse devoid of standard poetic effects and limited in subject matter to "war stories"? A strange thought, but not implausible.

Fortunately, this punitive aspect of Nemerov's sensibility rears its ugly head fairly infrequently. In Nemerov's oeuvre there are many poems which not only remain free of this self-destructive joking, but, remarkably, transcend the poet's general aesthetic strictures as well. "Redeployment," "The Goose Fish," and "The Makers" are just a few examples.

"Models," from *War Stories,* is another. In this poem, the juxtaposition of the model airplane-building boy and the soldier the boy becomes underscores marvelously the gulf between the reality of war and the young boy's romantic dream of a dogfight:

> The boy of twelve, shaping a fuselage
> Of balsa wood so easy to be sliced
> Along the grain but likely to get crushed
> Under the razor when it was cut across;
>
> Sanding the parts, glueing and lacquering
> And pasting on the crosses and the rings
> The brave identities of Fokker and Spad
> That fought, only a little before his birth,
>
> That primitive, original war in the air
> He made in miniature and flew by hand
> In clumsy combat, simulated buzz:
> A decade away from being there himself . . . .

"The War in the Air," also from *War Stories,* succeeds despite Nemerov's poetic restrictions. Here, the poet shows how the mourning of the war dead need not be done with false eulogies, but through the unlikely combination of dispassion and stoicism:

> For a saving grace, we didn't see our dead,
> Who rarely bothered coming home to die

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But simply stayed away out there
In the clean war, the war in the air.

Seldom the ghosts came back bearing their tales
Of hitting the earth, the incompressible sea,
But stayed up there in the relative wind,
Shades fading in the mind,

Who had no graves but only epitaphs
Where never so many spoke for never so few:

Per ardua, say the partisans of Mars,
Per aspera, to the stars.

That was the good war, the war we won
As if there were no death, for goodness' sake,
With the help of the losers we left out there
In the air, the empty air.

Poems like these are not all that rare in the poet's body of work. It is on the basis of them that Howard Nemerov should be regarded as one of our finest poets.

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Letters

Morality tales

To the Editors:
In regard to Hilton Kramer's excitement over "Morality Tales" ("Morality Tales on Tour," November, 1987)—once again Kramer rushes to the rescue of art, morality, and history!

Dear Mr. Kramer: To someone with your high literary aspirations, I would dare a brief suggestion—lay off the use of "alas," it makes you sound like a fuddy-duddy instead of a hero of our times.

Don't thank me, I am glad to be of help . . .

Leon Golub
New York City

Hilton Kramer replies:
It's a pity, alas, that Mr. Golub is so much better as a writer than as a painter.

Pollock and company

To the Editors:
The New Criterion's self-imposed mandate to bring overrated reputations down to size has suddenly sunk a whole flotilla with a single bomb. I am speaking of "Pollock and Company" by Jed Perl (November, 1987).

While not every Abstract Expressionist work deserves a devotional icon rating, Mr. Perl's wholesale demotion—"I continue to believe that the Abstract Expressionists are each and every one of them overrated . . ."—makes me wonder if the subject could ever have gotten a fair shake by this writer.

Closer to home, I feel that he grossly misrepresents an entire generation of art viewers with the statement, "But for many of us who were children in the Fifties the ugliness and the strangeness of Abstract Expressionism was never to be a part of our experience." (He is referring to Clement Greenberg's observation that "all profoundly original art looks ugly at first.") I cannot lament with Mr. Perl on generational grounds. What is it, precisely, which has so crippled our perception of art from an earlier, only slightly earlier, time? Did we have to be there to really get it?

As someone who was born in 1950 and developed a serious interest in Abstract Expressionism in the early Seventies, I did not find the works so clouded by the perfume of museum certification or compromised by proximity to origin as Mr. Perl. I saw them on my own two feet. I was profoundly impressed and continue to be affected, like many of us who were "children in the Fifties." To believe Mr. Perl would be to say that being born in a particular moment kills possibilities—precludes success at authentically experiencing, understanding, or enjoying art created before our time.

It sounds too much like a nostalgia for the days when art, artists, and those who championed their cause somehow lived more urgent, more real, lives. This kind of nostalgia, like the pop singer Madonna posing as Marilyn Monroe, is a valueless and very postmodern activity.

Mr. Perl wants a "conclusion" from Abstract

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Expressionism. Well wake up, Myth Buster, we are living the conclusion. An art so focused on the process of extracting an atavistic essence from the minds of the artists is bound to turn up some unpleasant news. In its own tragedy-seeking way, Abstract Expressionism was partly an early warning signal for the most important crisis of our time. That is, the condition expressed by André Malraux when he said, "There cannot be another Michelangelo in today's society because our faith in man is too weak." This chilling message is a part of our legacy from the New York School. But it is not the entire legacy.

Let's not destroy, with a sullenly jealous fling of the wet blanket, a generation of artists who, in their own individual, desperate lives, sought to be heroic.

John E. Scofield
Port Chester, NY

Jed Perl replies:

Mr. Scofield speaks of *The New Criterion*'s "mandate." I can only speak of my own objective, which is to look at as much art as I can, and then make judgments about some of it based on how it makes me feel. Edwin Denby once wrote that "the existence of an 'authoritative critic' or a 'definitive critic' is a fiction like that of a sea serpent." I agree. I've spent a good deal of time looking at Abstract Expressionist paintings—as, I gather, Mr. Scofield has; that we've come out feeling differently about them is entirely natural. Aesthetic experience is human experience. I was born in 1951—a year after Mr. Scofield—and if Mr. Scofield feels that I've misrepresented "our" generation, well, I can't argue with the way he feels. I can only say that there are many people of our generation who roughly agree with me; surely many would also agree with his belief that Pollock and the other Abstract Expressionists have the staying power that the avant-garde audience of the Fifties believed them to have.

No, I'm not nostalgic about the Fifties. When I said that the Abstract Expressionists expressed their time and place I meant it as a compliment. I have no "nostalgia for the days when art, artists, and those who championed their cause somehow lived more urgent, more real, lives." If Mr. Scofield has read me regularly in *The New Criterion* he must know that I spend a great deal of time going to galleries, and writing about what is going on right now. I'm too engaged in the present to be nostalgic about the past. There's much being painted and sculpted today that excites me as a critic, that makes me want to write. I wouldn't write if I didn't feel I had a subject in the positive sense. Indeed, I write for *The New Criterion* because it's the only publication that has allowed me to write about the things I like in the way I like. The reader who registers the put-down of a major reputation (David Salle, late de Kooning), and doesn't also register the put-up of an underknown or unknown artist (Nicolas Moufarrege, Stanley Lewis) isn't really getting my point. Far from being interested in "Myth Busting" (good phrase, by the way), I've gone out of my way to avoid certain myths entirely. I chose not to write about the David Salle and Julian Schnabel shows at the Whitney because Myth Busting strikes me as a bore. The people I'm writing for have already made up their minds about Salle and Schnabel.

Mr. Scofield hasn't really addressed the heart of my argument—that Abstract Expressionist paintings work "at a glance," but that they don't engage us on a longer look. It seems to me that this points to a basic difference in aesthetics, in what we look for in, and desire from, works of art.

What has surprised me in the past couple of years isn't that some readers have misread me as a Myth Buster—that's to be expected—but that many people whose taste is very different from my own feel some affinity for what I'm saying. Although the artists who formed my taste were violently anti-Greenbergian, and although I've had harsh words for some art that falls under the rubrics Greenbergian or formalist, I've had some nice nods and waves and handshakes from the formalist side. This has been a surprise to me; it's also been a surprise to some of my old friends, who've always seen the formalists as their (our) enemy.

At first it seemed to me that I was striking a responsive chord with the formalists because even if my definition of quality differed from theirs, at least we were all still talking about quality. I may see major developments in the figure compositions of Gabriel Laderman, they may see major developments in the Color-field paintings

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of Jules Olitski; but at least we're both looking for an experience in front of a work of art. The aesthetic disputes that may have seemed major twenty years ago seem minor today, when the very idea of taking pleasure in a painting or a sculpture has been deconstructed almost out of existence. Moreover, at a time when Greenbergian thought looks for no major revolutionary shifts in the foreseeable future, it suddenly seems rather close in temper to the thinking of contemporary representational painters, and to the newer abstract painters who find their inspiration in classic pre-World War II abstraction (Klee, Kandinsky, Mondrian).

Recently I've begun to feel that the formalists are interested in what I'm doing for more than just the we're-all-in-the-same-boat reason. Having lived by Greenberg, many people are now looking for answers to what they themselves perceive as the lacks, the absences. This in no way means that they're ready to abandon their old masters; but perhaps they want to understand Pollock and Newman in new ways, or see them in new relations to other things. Far from wanting to be a Myth Buster, I've been almost embarrassed to confess my own difficulties with Pollock, de Kooning, and the others. It would be interesting to hear a new positive response to Pollock, by which I don't mean the kind of essays included in the Albright-Knox catalogue, which question everything except the things that ought to be questioned. Greenberg—and others—have persuaded me about Hofmann; or rather they've helped my eyes to see Hofmann. I've yet to be persuaded about Pollock. I'm interested in other people's assertions; I believe in persuasion. Let a great new age of criticism begin.

The academy vs. the canon

To the Editors:

I would like to congratulate Roger Kimball on his devastating exposure of ideological literary studies in the September issue of *The New Criterion* ("The Academy Debates the Canon"). I can only say that I felt proud that nobody from Berkeley was invited to the conference at Yale.

The gloomy thought occurs to me that there is some direct relation between the vehemence and intransigence of academic radicalism and the lack of any real political movement outside the campuses to support it (I would include even feminism in this generalization). The one glimmer of hope I see is that, despite the noise made by the sort of people Roger Kimball listened to, there is another world out there somewhere in academia that thinks differently. From my own experience lecturing at a variety of campuses around the country and speaking from the other side of the barricades, I can say that I have discovered a surprising degree of receptivity to a less ideological, more literary viewpoint.

Robert Alter
University of California
Berkeley, CA

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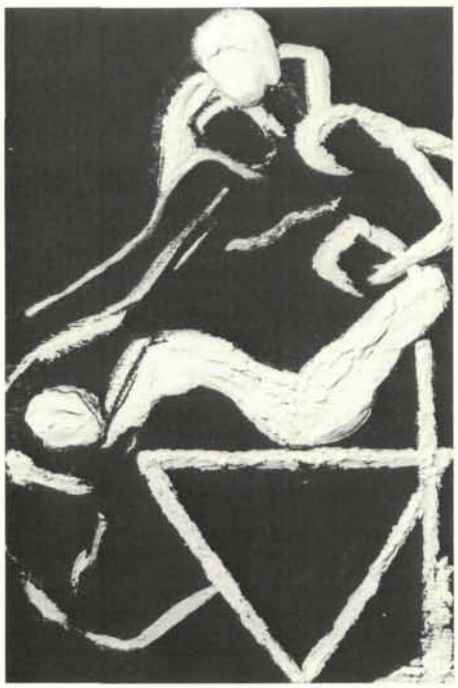

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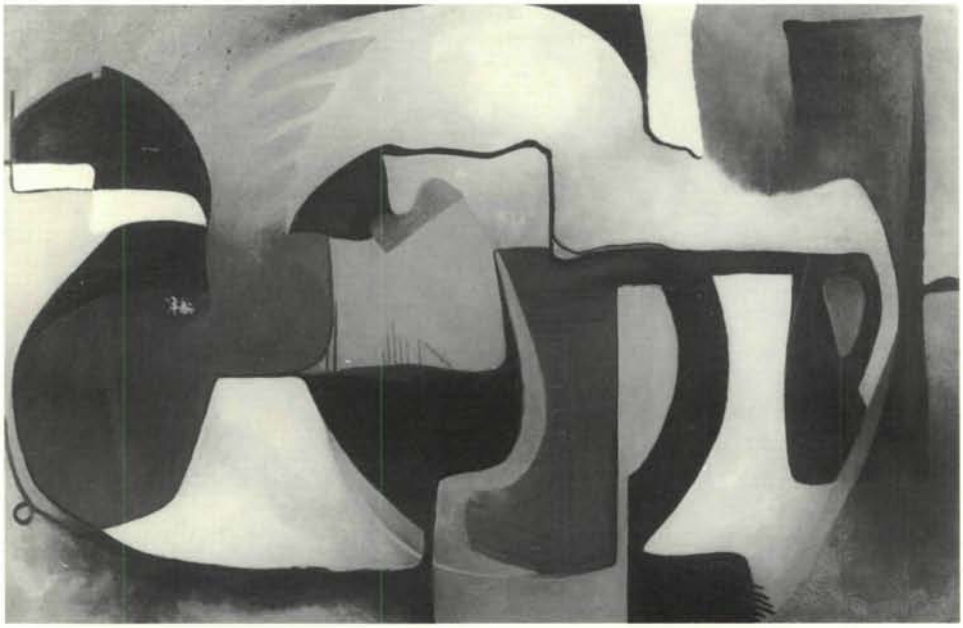

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